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FOUND OUT

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A STORY



254

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"COMIN' THRO' THE RYE."

90122

LONDON

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January 17, 1885



FOUND OUT.

CHAPTER I.

The love that I hae chosen,
I'll therewith be content,
The saut sea shall be frozen,
Before that I repent. . . .
Repent it shall I never, until the day I dee.

The windows of Mallinger Towers struck out north, south, east and west, bright shafts of light which announced to all whom it might concern that its master was at home, and about to hold one of those elegant revels with which he occasionally delighted the county. One room alone in all the vast pile threw out no beams upon the darkness, nor did it boast any light within, save what was furnished by some pallid moonbeams that struggled through the upper part of a window from which the shutter had rotted, and so made partly visible the desolation of a spot that seemed to be alike shunned by the eye and foot of man.

An indescribable sense of rust and disuse was in

the air, unutterably bleak and forlorn looked the long vista of polished boards upon which no scrap of furniture rested, no sign of human occupation or life showed, offering a startling contrast to the lofty walls that were peopled, and panoplied, and most richly set forth by the dead. For here were whole groups of arms and armour, varying in age from the stone period with its simple knife, axe, and arrow fashioned out of flint, down to those equally simple, but more deadly weapons with which science enables man the more readily to slay his brother. Here were no dummies, no show-pieces bought for their curiosity and beauty; each portion of armour had been worn, each arm had been used, and a *virtuoso* would have spent years in the due appreciation of a collection that one man of taste alone had gathered together, and another man of genius had arranged.

If a spy could have cut off his feet, and got a fellow spy to hook him to the wall, then there would be no reason why half a hundred men should not look out upon the deserted chamber, and overhear any ghostly secrets that might be flitting abroad; but as it was, no living thing bigger than a rat could have hid itself in the room, or been for a second concealed from any one who entered.

Flint, bronze, iron and steel, beautiful were the effects produced by their arrangement; each sheaf of weapons with its appropriate suit of armour below, however rude and faulty in some instances: but reaching its maximum of perfection in the cuirass of a Roman, so exquisitely moulded to the form that when represented in sculpture, it is hardly possible to distinguish it from the nude figure.

Here the moonlight touched an Assyrian's shield and *justaucorps*, there an axe-head that thrust by a Gaul into the cleft branch of a growing tree, became so firmly a part of the bough, that flint and wood were welded together into a weapon with which he might defy his enemies; yonder one saw those Grecian arms with whose aim and clamour Homer has filled the earth; not a nation was left unrepresented, not a missile discovered from former ages was absent from this room, the richest in historic wealth, as it was the most shunned, of the whole house. And so it happened that miracles of industry, beauty, and splendid memories of by-gone heroes, rusted unnoticed, and all the art of the man who had grouped them was lost; and this because a trivial thing enough had happened here twenty years ago—the death of a man by his own hand.

Be sure that from beneath many a strangely fashioned helm the spirit of a brave man looked out and despised him as he fell, though his nearest and dearest may have wept over him as bitterly as if he had been carried home from a battle in which he had lost himself only to secure victory to his cause.

Ay, here a coward had slain himself, and under such circumstances that perhaps he would have done worse for himself and his, had he left the room alive. Only from that day forth the fencing-room was closed, and none were known to cross its threshold save the master of the house, who came now and again to practise alone that rapier play in which he had been engaged with his friend, when that friend had slipped the button from his foil, and turning it against his own breast—died.

The master of the house was an adept in the use of arms, and to this extraordinary proficiency might be due the ease, grace and elegance of all his movements, and that look and gesture of vigorous alertness which the constant use of the foil and broadsword invariably bestow: but of late years he had somewhat neglected the practice, and had not in fact entered this room for many months.

But what is that faint sound yonder but the click of a closing panel? And is there not a presence, a step, a flutter as of movement in the deserted place? What is this tall shape, that shrouded in black steals from the shadow of the wall into the moonbeams, and trembling, palpitating, gazes fearfully around as if in search of it knows not whom, in horror of it knows not what! It shrinks as it reaches the centre of the room, and looks down as if in search of the blood-stain it knows to be there, then lifts its hand in an attitude of listening to the ghostly tapping of a branch outside the window, then glances over its shoulder to where—see, is not that a rat stealing towards her?

For it is a woman, and with a stifled cry, she stoops, and with one bare arm sweeps her draperies clear of the floor, then retreats backwards to the wall, where beneath a magnificent Mascaron sword that seems in the very act of descending on her head, she cowers and listens with her whole soul! But there was only the tap, tap of the bough on the pane, the scurrying of invisible armies of rats behind the wainscot, the play of the moonbeams on dinted sword, and battered shield, on helmets that gasped, grinned, showed here a dolphin's head outline, and there a pig's snout, anon

a *pot-de-fer* worn by one of Louis XIV.'s soldiers, and now a Russian's, misshapen, with the face of a gargoyle, and seeming to watch with a malevolent leer the shrinking girl whose eyes it had caught. And she was a-cold, a-cold—the very love-warmth within was failing her, and the courage that had brought her hither seemed to her superhuman now that in chill blood she reflected upon it, knowing that any moment the panel might unclose to admit her father.

But whence came this icy stream of wind that she suddenly felt play over her, and who was this that having entered by the window, closed it, and replaced the shutters, then came swiftly up the room, holding out impatient arms into which the girl ran as for her very life?

"Oh, Jack, the rats!"

"Oh, Kitty, *you!*"

They were warm now, and safe. "Imparadised in one another's arms," and then—for surely a young man is a fool who does not put his kisses first, and his words afterwards—he gave neither himself nor her a chance of speech for a full minute, though of course it was the woman who recovered her voice first.

"This is very wrong, Jack!" she said, reproachfully, hiding her head on his shoulder to avoid a new onslaught.

"Very," said Jack, "and as delicious as it's wrong. Oh, Kitty, Kitty! Dearest, sweetest, loveliest, truest, *truest* Kitty, to think that I have got you here in my arms, and that I have not seen you these two years, and that you *love* me, and by to-morrow—O! was there ever such a lucky, miserable wretch on earth?"

"Yes," she said, softly, "for I am just such another. Even if you had not been going away to-morrow, I could not meet you again as I am meeting you here to night."

"What?" he said, then put her back, and framing her face in his hands, turned it so as to face the moonlight. "And have you made *him* a promise?"

"When he brought me from school," she said, gently, "I promised him that I would not write to you, or send you a message, or even *speak* to you, if by accident I met you outside Mallinger gates, and he said he would make it his business that I should not meet you *inside* them, and I am breaking the spirit of my agreement by meeting you here to-night."

"So there was an agreement?" said Jack, swiftly.

"Yes. That if I made no attempt to see or marry you, I should not on the other hand be asked to marry any one else—without my consent."

"And that no man living shall get," said Jack, fiercely. "But do you mean to say that we are to go on *dying* of love for each other indefinitely?"

"It is only for a year and a half," said Kitty, a smile breaking over all her face. "You would not let me finish the story—my promises of good behaviour were only to last till I was twenty-one! And so you really think I am dying for you, Jack?"

"If you are not, you ought to be," he said, giving her arm a little shake. "Just think of what these two years have been for me, without a word or a sign from you, not even knowing your whereabouts—or that fifty men might not be as crazy to marry you as I am!"

"Oh!" said Kitty, with a rueful smile; "there were no men—only masters, you know—and in the holidays there were not even those—only father, who came twice in every year to make sure that you had not found me out!"

"And he made all sure by swearing you to a promise," said Jack, bitterly; "and he has his spies everywhere—that's why I asked you to meet me *here* to-night, because there isn't a servant in the place that dares put his head inside the door."

"But *he* dares," said Kitty, with a glance of fear at the distance; "and he said, Jack, and that is why I came—at least, partly—that if he caught you here, he would treat you like any other burglar who came clandestinely about his house!"

"Let him catch me first," said Jack, with vigour; then seeing how her head drooped, suddenly snatched her in his strong young arms and so crushed her that she cried out,

"Oh, Jack, Jack, my ball-dress!"

He put her down hastily; he had seen only the black cloak, felt only the milk-white arms round his neck; but now he found the moonlight insufficient, and wondered that he could have satisfied himself with so pale a glimpse of her.

"Let me look at you," he said, and struck a match and held it above her in the one hand, while with the other he unfastened her cloak, masterfully as any bridegroom to whom has willingly come his bride. The clasps yielded, the cloak slipped down, and lay in a heap, while out of it the girl shone like an angel in white, to which a hoar-frost of diamonds had clung as she descended to mother earth. The match went

out, but the moonlight did here more lovely service surely as she stood silent before him, and he said slowly:

"You are altered, Kitty, and grown."

"Am I too tall, Jack?" she said, looking up at him proudly, and thinking that never had girl so brave a wooer as this blue-eyed, sunny-haired young soldier of six feet, for a sight of whom her heart had ached so bitterly during the past two years.

"Am *I* too tall, Kitty?" he said, catching that tender glow of love and pride in him, in her eyes.

"You—you are Jack."

"And you," he said, "oh, there is no name for you, but Kitty—just Kitty—and you shall be that to no other man living so long as I am above earth," and he crushed her once more in an embrace that took her breath away, and in its despair startled her with a foreboding of coming evil.

"What is it, Jack?" she whispered. "We are true as death to one another—and the year and a half will soon be up—and if I can wait that little time, cannot *you?*"

"You may have to wait too long," he said, "for we are ordered abroad on active service, and every day expect to get orders to sail. It was with the utmost difficulty I got here to-night—contriving the whole plan of seeing you on my way—but I *have* seen you, Kitty, and come what may, we have had this one half-hour together."

She shivered a little as if she felt the loss of her cloak, then slipped out of his arms to stoop and find it; but her eyes were dim, and it was Jack's hand that drew it about her, slowly and grudgingly

hiding from his eyes the exquisite shape that half a hundred men's eyes would be privileged to gaze on that night.

As he fastened the clasps beneath her chin, their eyes met, and one gentle hand stole out and rested like a snowflake on his breast.

"Jack," she said, "I could brave anything now that I have seen you, and if you do not come back, I shall *remember* you."

And then she kissed him, for the first time perhaps in her life of her own free will, and moved as if to leave him. He could not stay her, he knew that those precious minutes, calculated by him like a miser, were up, and that if after the dressing-bell, an hour was her own, the ringing of the dinner one must summon her to the room which held her father, possibly already suspicious of her absence.

"Good-bye, Jack!"

"Good-bye!"

Even the Russian helm seemed to grin with less malevolence as it looked down upon the kiss that might be the very last in which the two pairs of beautiful young lips would meet.

CHAPTER II.

And when he came to that castle,
They were sat down to dine,
A score o' nobles there he saw,
Sat drinkin' at the wine.

MALLINGER DASHWOOD happened to be the only person in the white drawing-room when his daughter entered it, and he came to meet her with as cold and polished a courtesy as if she had been his guest.

She met him in his own spirit; and seen side by side the resemblance between father and daughter was very striking, for both were hazel-eyed and brown-haired, both had that stag-like carriage of the head, and perfect symmetry of limb that marked them out as uncommon in a crowd, and dwarfed all other men and women to insignificance beside them—though here the likeness ceased, for in heart and expression there could not be found a greater contrast than between Mallinger and Katharine Dashwood.

"Your dress is in excellent taste," he said, his cold eyes scanning her from head to foot. "You have dropped the school-girl, and yet you do not flaunt the heiress; but surely that is a tear upon your cheek? Allow me"—and he removed it—"I would advise you in future to confine them to your pillow; they are out of place in a ball-room."

"Like my heart," said his daughter, as the door opened, and a lady came fluttering in, whose attire

seemed to consist of a few cerulean clouds, loosely clasped together with pearls.

"Ah! Mrs. Vivien!" said her host, as he went to meet her, "you bring us summer skies—and this is my daughter, fresh from school, and dancing to-night at her first ball."

Mrs. Vivien opened her blue eyes with some astonishment, and as they slowly travelled up to the crown of Katharine's stately head, they said, as if she had spoken, "Too tall!" but in her heart she thought, "Too young, too fresh!"

"And so your cousin could not come," said Mr. Dashwood, as he left her to meet half a dozen people who now came in, followed so quickly by others that in a few minutes the twenty or so of dinner guests were assembled, and the women were taking languid stock of one another, and all the men were looking at Katharine.

Now there showed one uncommon feature in this company, that there was not a single plain or uninteresting person in it; for Dashwood asked his guests to please himself, and was himself entertained by the beauty, wit and agreeability with which he furnished his house for the time being.

It was his habit to send with each invitation a printed *menu* of the proposed guests, so that all such awkward accidents as the meeting of a lady with a former admirer, or of a gentleman with a lady who was only vice-regent of his affections, were entirely averted; and an invitation from royalty was not coveted so eagerly as one that carried its *cachet* of beauty to every woman who received it.

The men might be wits if they pleased, so might

the women; but intellect without good looks was rigorously excluded, perhaps because so large a portion of the wit was furnished by the master of the house himself.

The men of the county came eagerly when invited by Dashwood—came to look, to sigh, to get a whole liberal education from the contemplation of such charms as they had never dreamed of; and the best-looking women of the county, however seldom asked, came also, only to retire with secret tears, and a deadly hatred for the milliners who had betrayed them.

They had no stones to sling at the heads of these smart people, who all spoke affectionately of their absent lords, and to every one of whom had befallen that accident from which even the most fashionable fine lady is not exempt—viz., a baby; they did not know their inner lives, but could only gauge them by the perfection of their clothes, which they found immortal.

"Do we wait for any one?" said Lady Becky Selwyn, looking up at her host, "and we are all *so* hungry!"

"Mr. B—— is not here," said Dashwood, "we will give him one minute more of grace—in which I may smell your roses," he added, and stooped to the yellow cluster that adorned the breast of her white velvet gown.

"Mr. B—— and Mr. Velasquez," announced the butler from the door, and Mallinger Dashwood looked up to see the great man approaching, with a far younger and taller man beside him, at sight of whom he started violently, and put out his hand as if to

wave him back, but the next moment he had met and welcomed the pair.

"My secretary, Mr. Velasquez," the great man said; though if he had introduced him as one of his secretaries, he would have spoken nearer the truth. But when the host moved to introduce the two men to his daughter, it was the turn of Mr. Velasquez to start, to change colour, as his hand touched hers, while something looked at her out of his black eyes that she never forgot, and never understood until—until—

"Dinner is served," said the butler; and the great man, on the tiptoe of ecstasy at having so many pretty souls on which to gaze, offered Katharine his arm, and strutted out with her, resolved that queen and country notwithstanding, he would throw statesmanship to the dogs, and remain here a whole week.

Mr. Velasquez fell to the lot of Mrs. Vivien, and proved himself unusually quiet for a young man of such extraordinary personal attractions.

To the richness, colour and grace given by Southern blood, he united the splendid stature and build of the best style of Englishman; his manners and gestures too were thoroughly British, but not so the sadness of his eyes, and a curious quietude of features, that to close observers suggested a volcano of slumbering passion beneath.

"A brown beauty," said Mrs. Vivien, her eyes following his to Katharine, who sat opposite her father at the middle of the long oval table.

"No, a hazel one, I think," he said, "she is so extremely fair. She is Mr. Dashwood's only daughter?"

"Yes, and his heiress, if she marries with his con-

sent. But he is evidently in no hurry, for there is not a man here he would accept as a son-in-law."

"No," said Mr. Velasquez, looking round, "they all seem more or less attached."

"I have never met you in society," said Mrs. Vivien, flashing a pair of scornful turquoise eyes on the insensibility of his black velvet ones, "so how do you know how we live—*nous autres?*

"Private secretaries have opportunities," he said; then paused and looked, as if by accident, at a man opposite who was regarding Mrs. Vivien's animated manner with very decided dissatisfaction.

"Ah! poor Noll!" she said, lightly, "but he is beginning to tire me. Mallinger made a mistake in asking us here together. It is our future admirers, not our present ones, who should be asked to meet us!"

"Is there a single husband here, *par hazard?*" said Mr. Velasquez, looking round.

But Mrs. Vivien at that moment made Noll, otherwise Lord Oliver, happy by turning her back upon Mr. Velasquez and concerning herself solely with her dinner.

CHAPTER III.

Shyning was the painted ha'
Wi' gladsum torches bricht
Full twenty gowden dames sate there
And ilk ane by a knicht:
Wi' music cheer
To please the ear,
When bewtie pleased the sicht.

THE host and the private secretary did not approach each other until the gentlemen left the dinner for the ball-room, and then it was at once visible that they were the two handsomest men in it, though a difference of five-and-twenty years lay between them.

Their *rapprochement* was in so far curious that each waited for the other to speak, and over the eyes of both an invisible curtain seemed suddenly drawn, leaving them blank of speculation, or even natural inquiry as they looked at each other.

"You remind me of some one I once knew, Mr. Velasquez," said his host, after a moment or two of silence, in which there was yet no hesitation.

"A lady?" said Velasquez.

"A lady. She lived in this neighbourhood for many years——"

"And her name?" said Velasquez, his sombre eyes rayless as pools of ink.

"Mrs. Fitzhugh, the wife of my friend."

"I have heard the story," said Mr. Velasquez; and then Mr. Dashwood's duties took him away, and in a few minutes the dance had begun.

Perhaps those present numbered a hundred souls,

all told—all pleasant to the eye, all bent on dancing the old year out and the new year in, and all as heathenishly oblivious to the sins of the past year, as they were ready to commit them over again in the coming one.

All save two persons, one of whom was dancing with Katharine; for seeing him quite alone, she had asked if she should find him a partner? Whereupon he had taken *her*, and Mallinger Dashwood had smiled, then at the first opportunity asked Mr. B—— where he had picked up his secretary.

He found the great man happy, his eagle eye roving from charm to charm, and wishing that like the census he could embrace them all, and only in the interval of his spasms of admiration could be extracted any information as to Mr. Velasquez.

"Yes—yes, a handsome fellow—and I know that you like handsome fellows; but look at that woman's back—and this one's shoulders—and there's an arm! where did I pick him up? Oh! he's a *protégé* of my wife—and he does light work for me—his parents are dead—look at that goddess in amber! Introduce me, for Heaven's sake—and if her husband isn't a peer, I'll make him one!"

"But she must make *you* happy first," said Mr. Dashwood with a slight smile, as he moved away; and having effected the introduction, glanced cynically around on an assemblage out of which he would only have owned one as daughter, and not one as wife.

Not that there was a woman present that the most tight-laced dowager in society could have presumed to flout, or refuse to introduce to her young daughters. No reckless Mœnad flung her arms aloft here, no Bacchanal with roving glances swam in the dance;

the only difference between this ball room (apart from its planning) and any other in the county, lay in the loveliness of the women, and the perfection of their adorning; but this seemed a a great deal to the handsome outsiders present that night.

Perhaps the room helped them—for Mallinger Dashwood had too keen a perception of the beauty of a woman's skin to offer it a light background, and so gave it a foil in a wainscoting of black oak to the height of twenty feet; but set the wax lights somewhat low, leaving such curious eyes as could raise themselves so high, to follow the friskings of those gods or goddesses who, whether on the upper walls or ceiling, seemed never to have frisked enough for their own and lovers' content.

Few men lifted their eyes so high, the flesh and blood charms below contented them so well; but to-night a girl looked up, and her partner's eyes followed, for already it seemed natural to him to note her every word and glance, just as he and she seemed the only pair possible to each other out of the whole room.

The women said, with a sneer, that she danced with him because, save her father, there was not another man present by whom her stature would not look uncouth; but Katharine had scarcely noticed her partner's looks, she had only felt drawn to him by one of those curious instincts of natural affinity, of like towards like, that reveals itself when two persons meet in the midst of surroundings that in each of them equally arouse mistrust or fear.

"The ceiling is beautiful," said Mr. Velasquez, "but the room above it must be more beautiful still."

She started violently, and looked at him with a

lightning dread, suspicion, and tremor all in one. In some subtle way she felt him to understand—so that for a minute the two stood gazing at each other, with an expression curiously out of place in the ball-room, and offering a target to the eyes and words of the lookers-on.

"Are your thoughts of heaven?" said a woman's voice beside Mallinger, and the tap of a flower fell on his arm, "for surely the young pair you are watching have found it!"

"No," said her host, "I was thinking at that moment of Providence — how it brings all things to those who wait — even revenge. And as a case in point, see this lace flounce in tatters; and now Mrs. Vivien is happy — for Providence has destroyed the only stumbling-block to her being the best dressed woman in the room."

"Next to your daughter," said Lady Alice, ruefully. "Dear Dashwood, if you *must* have her here to eclipse us all, why on earth could you not leave her to the mercies of a country dressmaker? All our men are in love with her, but not one of them dare go near her for fear of offending us!"

"There is safety in numbers," said Mallinger, carelessly.

"But not with a Mr. Velasquez," said Lady Alice, gathering her tatters around her preparatory to flight. "Can't you see that on both sides it is a case of love at first sight?"

"Is it?" said Dashwood, and smiled as the lady fluttered away—then his face changed, an extraordinary expression playing upon it, but inscrutable to the eyes that at intervals had intently watched him throughout the evening.

CHAPTER IV.

The sword was sharp, and sore did bite,
I tell you in certain;
To the heart he did him smite. . . .

When Mr. Dashwood went next morning an hour or so after breakfast to look for his guests, he found them with one consent in the picture-gallery, engaged in the noble pursuit of a "fly-hunt." The great man himself was standing on a chair, and puffing his cheeks out in his efforts to keep aloft a descending scrap of white paper, the while he steadied himself by the waist of the nearest lady, while the rest of the men and women (with two exceptions) were rushing hither and thither, pell-mell, their bodies bent backwards and upwards, blowing like cherubs towards the descending atoms that not ill resembled snow, and being beaten backward by those vigorous breaths from below, retreated only to flutter down again on the heads and faces of the struggling host.

Lord Noll's head had just met Lady Becky's in a sounding crack that eclipsed the deeper anguish of Lord Dolly, whose toes had just been danced upon by the finest and heaviest romper present; Jack St. Leger had nearly got his teeth knocked out by the agile bound of a portly Venus just beneath his chin. The great man at this moment overbalanced himself, but with the grace of second childhood tumbled plump into a beauty's arms; two lovers had shown such heartless indifference to each other's bruises, that

already a change of *cicisbeo* floated in the lady's mind; and all were growing hot and dishevelled (however freely Hogarth's line of beauty might be displayed) when a cool, inquiring voice was heard to say, "Is this a new intellectual amusement?" and the fly-catchers brought their chins down with a haste that nearly dislocated them.

"It is a fly-hunt," said Mrs. Vivien, who had been giving only the faintest possible puffs upwards, "an invention of my own, and splendid exercise"—she looked sweetly round on the flushed countenances, the disordered tresses of her dearest friends, as they threw themselves down on the nearest chairs—"and we are all rather hot—I fear we have made a good deal of noise."

She was not in the least hot herself, and had not a curl out of place, and Mallinger Dashwood smiled cynically as he glanced at her, then at the only other cool woman in the room—his daughter. She was standing at a farther window, looking out, and with her was Mr. Velasquez. Long ago they had turned their backs on the vulgar romp, and now were gazing down at a long avenue that in the night had become so beautifully frosted over with snow, that as one gazed, one almost expected an invisible horn to sound, and to see a multitude of fairies and merry-men sweep up the long arcade, vanishing away like morning dew as they neared the house!

"The secretary's duties are light," said Mrs. Vivien, glancing at the pair by the window.

"And your rule is heavy," said her host, as his eyes travelled from one distressed group of fly-catchers to another.

"Oh! I have a better amusement for the evening," she said airily, "it does not make you so hot, and it is much more amusing."

"What is that?" said Lord Dolly, who sat at her elbow, and punished his face with a red silk handkerchief.

"You light a candle," said Mrs. Vivien, "and put it on a table. Then you go four paces away from the candle and have your eyes bandaged. Then you go straight ahead and blow the candle out."

"But *do* you?" said Lord Dolly.

"I never knew but one person who did," said Mrs. Vivien, placidly, "and she was a woman—and of course peeped—but if we all try to-night, somebody may be honestly lucky!"

"No more waste of breath for me," said Lord Dolly, piously, "and I think Miss Dashwood's very wise," he added, "to keep out of it."

"Perhaps she preferred Mr. Velasquez's sighs to his puffs," said Mrs. Vivien languidly, then turned her back on Lord Dolly, as another man approached.

His collar was limp, he too was flourishing a handkerchief like a towel, and he had an exhausted air as he sank down beside her.

"I know a better game than that," he said, between gasps; "you all shut your eyes and draw a pig—then compare your pigs afterwards—and it's more fun, and less loss of breath!"

"That will suit some of these people better," said Mrs. Vivien, glancing round on the more or less prostrate charms scattered through the room, "meanwhile we must amuse ourselves. Go and tell Mr. Dashwood I want to see that splendid collection of armour he has got in the fencing-room."

Lord Dolly stared, but went, and had to go pretty far as Mr. Dashwood had just reached the isolated couple by the window, and was politely asking them if they did not feel the cold. Neither had time to answer before Lord Dolly came up, and delivered his message verbatim.

"To be sure," said Mallinger Dashwood, but without turning, and his eyes full on Mr. Velasquez.

If he had been looking at his daughter, if her dress even had touched him, he must have seen the change, or felt the shock that thrilled her; but he saw only Velasquez, who stood as one to whom his host's words had no concern, and in another moment Dashwood had turned on his heel, and rejoined Mrs. Vivien.

"It is too cold to go out," she said, with a sarcastic glance at the ruffled female plumage around her, "and I have heard so much about your beautiful armour—will you take us to see it?"

Some of those who heard her, held their breath at her audacity—was she not aware that this was the one closed chamber in the house, and to which reference was profoundly shunned?

For a moment Mrs. Vivien's and Mallinger Dashwood's eyes met like flint and steel; then with a backward look at the young pair by the window, and with an odd gesture that combined impatience and invitation, he said:

"Come."

And they did come, flashing after him like a gay company of paroquets, rejoicing in the coolness that met them as they traversed endless corridors, coming at last to a heavily moulded door, of which the key was in the host's pocket.

"So you come here yourself sometimes," said Lady Becky as he produced it, in her clear penetrating voice.

"To be sure, why not? I have nothing to fear;" but some one within earshot shuddered as he stepped over the threshold, for in the clear morning light would not those late footprints in the dust show visibly, or perchance a shutter half drawn betray the visitor of over-night.

But the ladies' whisking skirts, as they spread through the room, quickly obliterated those guilty traces, and Katharine dared to breathe when Lord Oliver at the one end, and Mr. Velasquez at the other opened the shutters, and let in a flood of light on the desolate, lovely room.

In the exclamations of delight that rose like a gently increasing storm, the curiosity of Mr. Velasquez, as to the fastenings, position and surroundings of the window he had just unshuttered were unobserved; even Katharine stood unnoticed, as her eyes rested on the spot were yesternight two lovers had possibly spoken their last good-bye, and where now a crowd of fine ladies trooped and screamed, suspecting rats, and furtively searching for that death-stain which, on some portion of the polished boards, was known to exist.

Mrs. Vivien did not hunt; she had been intently watching Dashwood's face ever since she entered, and presently approached him.

"Where is it?" she said.

"What?" questioned her host.

"The blood-stain—for I suppose there was one?"

"Here," said Mallinger Dashwood; but it was at Mr. Velasquez that he looked, as he moved to the centre of the room.

All gathered round and peeped, some of the men over the women's shoulders, Mr. Velasquez scarcely so long as the rest; then first one woman shivered, then another, and some with fear and some with a natural revulsion of cold, after the violent heat into which they had romped themselves, so that within three minutes the room was empty; but though Mr. Dashwood locked the door and replaced the key, it somehow happened, in the general scrimmage, that the barring and shuttering of the two great windows was forgotten.

CHAPTER V.

To ride, to run, to rant, to roar,
To always spend and never spare;
I wot, an' he were the king himsel,
Of gold and fee he mot be bare.

"For Heaven's sake, say something amusing!" said Mrs. Vivien, addressing indifferently the dozen or so of men and women who sat round the drawing-room fire one evening a couple of hours after dinner.

"I will," said Lord Dolly, opening his mouth instantly. "A man threw a stone at a she-wolf, and hit his mother-in-law, whereupon he remarked, 'Not so bad!' This comes direct to us from the ancients."

"Listen," said Lady Becky, when some laughter had subsided, "I will tell you something too. The widow of a fireworks-maker wished to place a suitable epitaph on his tomb, and haunted the surrounding churchyards in search of a hint. She found at last an inscription above an eminent sculptor that exactly suited her taste, and with a trifling alteration caused it to be inscribed on the marble. And this is how it ran? 'He has gone to a place where alone his *fire*-works can be excelled.'"

"Not so good as Mother-in-law," said Major Beaumont, holding his head in both hands in his effort to extract an idea, "but I know a story——"

"Without middle, beginning, or tail!" said Mrs. Vivien, cutting him short, "but there is one story I should like to hear"—she glanced hastily round as if

to make sure that no one present was concerned in it—"only unluckily there's not a soul here who knows it!"

"What is the story?" said the only outsider present, a man who had driven twenty miles to dine and stay the night, and who felt himself well rewarded for his trouble.

"Are you not playing billiards with the rest?" said Mrs. Vivien, dropping her cold eyes on him as he sat in the background; "but since you live in the neighbourhood you may know all about it—what happened in the fencing-room here, and why our host shuns it?"

"Yes, I know it," said Geoffrey Langworthy, slowly, "but it is not a pretty tale, and you would not thank me for telling it you. Besides, Dashwood might come in at any moment—or his daughter."

"She has gone to bed with a headache," said Mrs. Vivien, "and no earthly power would bring *him* out of the billiard-room before midnight. It is now just eleven—and we are all waiting!" she added, as she put both arms comfortably behind her head.

The other women had also composed themselves to listen, and the fire of bright eyes turned upon him might have discomposed a more accomplished man of the world than Geoffrey.

"Cheer up, old chap!" said Lord Noll, encouragingly, "they'll all be asleep in two minutes—they only want to get a beauty-sleep for a change!"

"But where am I to begin?" said Mr. Langworthy, helplessly; "with the old friendship between the two men, or with what happened on a certain day upstairs?"

"Begin from the very beginning," said Mrs. Vivien, turning upon him compelling eyes that scattered his wits, then forced him to pick them up again on the spot.

"They were old friends and neighbours," began Mr. Langworthy, feebly, "had been at school together, seen life together, travelled everywhere in each other's company, and at last came home to settle down only a few miles apart—only one brought home a wife."

"His name?" said Lady Becky.

"Fitzhugh."

"Ah!" she said, slowly, "I remember part of the story now—go on."

"She was very lovely, and of Spanish blood, and the friendship between the two men was as unbroken as ever; but it was well known that Mrs. Fitzhugh did all in her power to keep them apart, and that she would neither visit Mallinger Dashwood in his own house, nor receive him in her husband's."

Mr. Langworthy turned with a start, for some one had entered; but it was only Mr. Velasquez, who took up an attitude of listening a little way off, leaning his elbow against a tall majolica jar, evincing no curiosity in the tale.

"I don't like talking about a fellow in his own house," broke out Langworthy abruptly; "but there is nothing but good to be told of this one in the story, and he behaved splendidly all through—as everybody thought, excepting Mrs. Fitzhugh."

"But that comes later," said Mrs. Vivien, impatiently, "you left off where Mrs. Fitzhugh came home, and tried to make the men quarrel—she couldn't have

been a very wonderful woman, or she would have *done* it."

"At any rate she did not separate them," said Geoffrey, "they were always together, and ran neck-and-neck in their sports and expenses, though Fitzhugh was on his last legs of credit, and Dashwood as wealthy as he is now. They were still known as the two handsomest men in the county, and with the two handsomest wives, for within three years of Fitzhugh's marriage, Dashwood himself married; only there was this difference in their wives—that while Fitzhugh was known to adore *his*, Dashwood's wife was known to publicly adore *him*, and welcomed his friends just as cordially as Mrs. Fitzhugh went out of her way to avoid and dissever them from her husband."

"Oddly enough the two women became friends and met often, but always abroad, or at the house of Fitzhugh; and both were so lovely that men would ride fifty miles to see in the same ball-room the two who went by the names of Darkness and Light."

"Katharine Dashwood is dark," said Mrs. Vivien, abruptly, "was her mother the Darkness?"

"Miss Dashwood is very fair," said Mr. Langworthy, imperturbably; "only her hair and eyes lean to darkness—and her mother was fairer still, with blue eyes and chestnut hair, while Mrs. Fitzhugh had the colouring of—of—" he glanced around as if for inspiration, and his eyes fell on a living illustration of his thought, —"of Mr. Velasquez," he said, almost unconsciously.

"Then she must have been very beautiful," said the greatest lady present, with all the insolence of her rank, and looking at the young man; "and is Mr Velasquez by chance—a relation?"

But as Mr. Velasquez neither stirred nor spoke, the halting story was again begun, though with considerable doubt as to the point from which it started.

"But the dark beauty always cut the fair one out, and some people said that one of the husbands did not like it; but Dashwood had been married scarcely a year when all rivalries between the two women were over, and the end came."

"And one woman or the other was at the bottom of it!" said Lady Becky.

"No one was ever sure of it," said the story-teller, nervously, and at once thrown out of his bearings; "women don't always tell the truth, you know, when they are mad with grief?"

"Or at any other time?" said Lord Dolly, with an air of inquiry.

"We are getting the story in shreds and tatters," cried Mrs. Vivien, angrily, "will *everybody* hold his tongue till it is told?"

The men felt the insult inflicted by Mrs. Vivien's masculine pronoun, but the women resolved to deserve the honour, and buttoned their lips up tight, so that the story now went on almost undisturbed to its close.

"The end came," said Mr. Langworthy (girding up his loins to the task), "when Fitzhugh came over one morning to see Dashwood, and being pressed by his host to remain, he consented, then wrote a letter to his wife accounting for his absence, and this letter was duly sent and delivered. Now Dashwood had a passion for all exercises of the sword, and would spend hours in the fencing-room practising alone; and so angry was he at interruption that no one had the right of *entrée* to it save his friend Fitzhugh, and his butler.

"It was to this room that the two friends adjourned later, and hither the butler presently brought a letter addressed to his master.

"He found the two gentlemen fencing, and apparently not in the best of humours; indeed, their play struck him as so dangerous that he was glad to stop it, and at the first pause, presented the letter and retired, but only to the other side of the door, which was thick.

"For a while he heard nothing, then only the murmur of voices, then something louder; and at last a cry in his master's voice that made him rush in, to see Fitzhugh in the act of plunging a rapier through his breast, and sink backwards to the floor.

"Even in that moment of horror, the man thought he observed a scrap of white close to the rapier's hilt, but when he returned from the search for help on which his master sent him, the rapier was clean, save of blood, and only an open letter lay beside him. He picked it up, and at the inquest the letter was produced."

"A love-letter from his wife to his friend, probably," said Lady Alice, cynically.

"No—a letter from Dashwood's banker."

"Could any one prove that the letter Mr. Dashwood received, and the letter produced, were one and the same?" said Mr. Velasquez, quietly.

"Why, what further proof would you have?" said Langworthy, wheeling round to look at the young man, "a messenger from a bank brought it, the butler delivered it, and the very same letter and envelope were found by Fitzhugh—besides, his own wife had cashed the cheque!"

"But the butler spoke of something white—probably some scrap of paper—on his rapier," said Mr. Velasquez, in the same quiet tone; may not two letters on totally different subjects have got mixed on that fatal occasion?"

"There was never any such question of such an accident," said Mr. Langworthy, coldly, "nor could even the idea occur to any sane man. Circumstantial evidence so entirely supported that of Mr. Dashwood at the inquest that, had he given any other, he must have been proved a liar. He gave that evidence reluctantly enough, but without the slightest hesitation, to the following effect:

"On the day in question Fitzhugh had ridden over to see him, soon after breakfast, and in the course of the morning they had a conversation about a small piece of land Fitzhugh wished to sell, and that he wished to buy; and having agreed as to terms, he wrote a cheque for the amount and gave it to his friend, asking him to stay and dine with him that evening, Mrs. Dashwood being then ill upstairs, and in some danger, from a chill she had taken after her confinement.

"Fitzhugh assented, but said he must write to his wife not to expect him home, and he went into the library for that purpose, whither presently Dashwood followed him, and the letter being ready, a servant was rung for, and a mounted messenger despatched with it, the time being about half-past one o'clock.

"They then lunched together and went to the stables, afterwards playing billiards, and finally went to the fencing-room, where they had been practising rapier play for about half an hour, when the butler

brought him a letter from the manager of his bank, who wrote that a cheque for a very large amount signed by Mr. Dashwood had been presented by Mrs. Fitzhugh, and cashed within the last hour, but after her departure, something unusual about the signature attracted the cashier's attention, and he had come to him with the cheque, which was for £3,000. The cheque handed to Fitzhugh that morning in payment of the piece of land was £300 (the exact price that had, for some weeks past, been placed on it by the seller), and Mr. Dashwood's first impression was that he had made some mistake in the figures in filling in the cheque; and he at once handed the letter to Fitzhugh, asking him at the same time if he had looked at the cheque before enclosing it in the note he had sent to his wife."

Mr. Langworthy paused, and a quick breath ran like a sigh round the listening circle, while into Mr. Velasquez's eyes leaped a fire that made a curious contrast with the quietude of his manner, as he said:

"Does this account rest solely on Mr. Dashwood's testimony?"

"It does," said Mr. Langworthy. "On the testimony of a man of unblemished honour, and whose every word, as I have before said, is substantiated by facts."

"If the dead could speak, they might possibly tell a different tale," said Mr. Velasquez, tranquilly.

"I doubt it," said Geoffrey, "and as Mr. Dashwood's guest, you would do well to keep such doubts to yourself."

"I am not his guest," replied the young man,

quietly; "I am here as Mr. B.'s servant, and provided for like any other of his goods and chattels."

"Pretty cool that, for a man who aspires to Mr. Dashwood's most valuable belonging!" whispered Lady Becky, in an audible aside to Lord Oliver.

"Why *will* you talk?" cried Mrs. Vivien, impatiently, "we shall have Dashwood himself walking in before the tale is half over! What did Fitzhugh say when he confronted him with the letter?"

"At first he said it was a mistake—then confessed that being on the verge of ruin, the thought had struck him as he was enclosing the cheque to his wife to substitute for it another, and Dashwood's chequebook lying beside him, he had torn one out, and in a moment of madness had filled it in and forged the signature, then endorsing the cheque in his own handwriting, despatched it to his wife with a request that she would drive at once to the bank and get it cashed. He had not expected discovery to come so soon; but now it was here, he threw himself on his friend's mercy, promising to refund the money if Dashwood would acknowledge the signature to be his own."

A slight sound in the background made the ladies start and look round to see Mr. Velasquez, pale, with flaming eyes, his lofty figure towering above them all in the rage and passion that swelled him.

"A Fitzhugh beg like a craven to a Dashwood!" he said, in low intense tones before which the women shrunk—"was ever there such a clumsily concocted, preposterous tale?"

"Pray, sir," said Mr. Langworthy, on looking round, "are you a relation?"

"Perhaps," said Mr. Velasquez carelessly; "but I

should like to hear the end of this *romance*. After Mr. Fitzhugh had gone down on his knees to Mr. Dashwood, what happened?"

"What *happened* was witnessed by the butler," said Mr. Langworthy, turning his back on the young man; "what went before occupied a very few moments. As Dashwood for a moment hesitated, appalled at his friend's guilt, Fitzhugh suddenly slipped the button from his foil, and ran himself through the heart, falling backwards at the very moment that the servant rushed in, startled at the cry Dashwood had uttered, when too late he perceived Fitzhugh's intention."

"But the man who would rather die than face dishonour was scarcely the man to forge his friend's name," said Mrs. Vivien, thoughtfully; "it is a curious story, and the only explanation of it is—a woman. How did Mrs. Fitzhugh take it?" she added, abruptly.

When they came to tell her that he was dead, they found her sitting beside a table on which was thrown down in a heap a mass of bank-notes and gold, at which she seemed to look in loathing, as they entered.

"When they told her the truth, she said, 'It was well for him to die, since he could take alms from his enemy!' and those around said her face was not half so terrible then, as when, two hours before, she had returned from that errand which her husband had begged of her to undertake.

"Then even as she spoke—they said—her face changed, and she threw up her arms, called upon him as if she knew he lived to answer, then like a madwoman fled out, and across the whole three miles of

country till she reached the Towers, and all stood back as she went straight to the fencing-room where her husband still lay, and Dashwood still stood, in his soul lamenting that he had not been quicker with the word and look of forgiveness that might have saved his friend's life."

Mr. Velasquez laughed, and Mr. Langworthy swore beneath his breath.

"Go on," said Mrs. Vivien, imperiously.

"She threw herself down by that scarcely cold body and implored him to speak to her, to forgive her for being angry with him; then, as she realized that he was dead, rose up and raved like a madwoman at Dashwood, accusing him of having murdered his friend; then when they showed her the poor hand already stiffened on the rapier as he lay, she cried out that Dashwood had worked upon him by some lies or devilish arts, and added certain wild accusations that no one heeded, and which in truth reflected but little credit on herself."

"What were the accusations?" said Mr. Velasquez and Mrs. Vivien, simultaneously.

"She accused him of having made love to her," said Geoffrey, dryly, "both before and since her marriage—particularly *since*. She said he had himself contrived to get the cheque forged, and that poor as her husband was, he would have died rather than accept charity from Dashwood."

"And she spoke the truth," said Velasquez.

"They were the ravings of a madwoman," went on Langworthy, in a matter-of-fact tone, "crazed by her loss, and probably were repented as soon as uttered; for soon she went away quietly with her dead, and

when he was buried—and in Christian ground, for the verdict was mercifully brought in as death through misadventure—she departed with her only child, a son, and has not been heard of since. Fitzhugh Court was mortgaged to its last acre, and passed at once into other hands; but to the very end Dashwood tried to help the deluded woman; and even when his wife lay dead in the house, for her illness had terminated fatally, he repeatedly sought an interview with Mrs. Fitzhugh, which was invariably and violently denied. So there the story ends," added Mr. Langworthy, in a tone of relief, "and I've told it about as badly as a tale *could* be told."

"No, it doesn't end there," said Lady Becky, sharply; "there is something behind it all—something that will come out one of these days, or I am much mistaken."

"I think it will," said Mr. Velasquez, quietly.

"What?" said a voice not far distant, and the master of the house advanced into the charmed circle that sat by the fireside, but which broke up hastily at his approach.

"Oh, nothing! we have only been telling stories," said Mrs. Vivien, stifling a yawn, "and we are all ready for bed"—and in another minute, like a broken string of bright-coloured beads, the ladies had passed up the staircase and out of sight.

CHAPTER VI.

The lintie is a bonnie bird,
And often flees frae off its nest;
Sae all the world may plainly see
They're far awa' that I love best.

"WHERE is Mr. B——?" said the master of Mallinger Towers, as he glanced round the breakfast table next morning, finding enough beauty there to excuse the absence of one who had never contributed so much to the good looks as to the wit of the company.

Every one looked at Mr. Velasquez, whose office was supposed to be a sinecure; but he continued his conversation with Katharine, as if he and she were *tête-à-tête* on a desert island.

"I beg pardon, sir," said the butler, advancing, "but Mr. B. went out early this morning, and found a deal of young women in the neighbourhood who want their souls saved—and he's praying with them now, and has sent word that if he's very deeply engaged, he may not be home to-night."

A smile ran round the table, and Lady Becky said, with an innocent air:

"Did you not know that he was exploring the beauties of the neighbourhood? He has wearied of *ours* already!"

"And how about the business of his country?" said Lord Dolly.

"Oh! it can wait!" said Lady Becky, "his despatch-

boxes are in his dressing-room—his Sovereign can wait, his country go to perdition, but meanwhile he —and his secretary"—she added, softly, "enjoy themselves!"

"The object for which man was born," said Mallinger Dashwood, "and the better to carry it out, I have devised a new amusement for this evening. The mere is frozen, and we will hold a *bal masqué* there instead of in the house."

"Delightful!" cried the women who could skate, and to whom mask and domino meant an intrigue.

"But we are too small a party to practise deceptions among ourselves," said Lady Becky; "and pray, where are the masks and dominoes?"

"Oh! I have bidden the guests," said the host, carelessly, "and you will all find your war-paint in your dressing-rooms, when you go upstairs presently. All the ladies dominces are white, the men's black; but at supper every one must wear a mask."

"And where are we to sup?" asked Mrs. Vivien, with a shiver; "on the mere? why, we shall be frozen long before supper-time!"

"The summer bath-room opens on to the mere," said Mr. Dashwood; "it has been boarded over, and makes an excellent ball-room, and behind it is erected the supper tent."

"We are having too much dancing!" said Mrs. Vivien, who hated to be taken by surprise; "why, we have hardly yet got over the fatigue of the other night!"

"But you will like this," said Mr. Dashwood. "Let me take you down to the mere presently, then

you will understand the arrangements better; if there is anything you object to—pray alter it."

"May I?" said Mrs. Vivien, colouring a little, and turning to the young lady, who indeed headed her father's table, but showed so few hostess-like airs that there was nothing to distinguish her from any guest present.

"Of course," said Katharine, in that indifferent voice which so curiously contrasted with her youth, and which, somehow, matched the composure of Mr. Velasquez, suggesting the idea that both were living introspective lives just then, save but for one sole peep-hole on the world—out of which they looked upon one another.

"I don't think I shall venture on the ice," said Mrs. Beaumanoir, a delicate beauty who rarely courted those rude exercises to which more vigorous beauties were addicted; "after all, I have a good many letters to write, and think I shall spend the evening in my boudoir!"

"What does it matter if we *are* cold—and *do* get red noses?" said Lady Alice, gaily, yet not without malicious intent, "for my part I intend to work all the havoc I can on the neighbouring squires, and whisper all sorts of scandalous stories of them into their wives' ears!"

"Only first we must get up some information about their characters," said Lady Becky, briskly, "and I give notice that I shall impound Mr. Langworthy for that purpose. You shall take me to the mere now," she added, to that gentleman, "and put me up to everything, and at supper-time you shall see some fine studies of rage depicted on bucolic countenances!"

"I did not know Langworthy was custodian of the secrets of the county," said Mr. Dashwood, with a look at his neighbour beneath which the latter coloured, but said, "Since you have none, Dashwood, you need not fear me;" and then the breakfast party broke up, half the women to try on their dominoes, and see if their masks fitted, the other half to wrap up for that pilgrimage to the mere which curiosity dictated.

After all it was an easy descent, and a surprise to those who made it, snugly covered in from the winds, and softly cushioned so as to make it a pleasant alley for those who chose to linger on the way, heedless of the exclamations of surprise uttered by those who went before, and announced fresh wonders at each step. Mallinger Towers stood on the summit of a gently rising hill, and at its back, and below it, was the summer bath-room, a long and beautiful building, composed almost entirely of white marble, whose eighteen windows looked out on the mere, so that a bather might leap from the bath to the water beyond, and, indeed, many fine ladies and gentlemen frolicked here in time of summer, dressed with as much care as for a reception.

But to-day no nymphs disported themselves, no floor of marble shone, but only waxed and polished boards; and each closed alcove that had served as beauty's dressing-bower, now showed a little interior, half visible through curtains of scarlet silk, while against the marble walls a trellis-work of ivy had been attached that in turn supported brackets, whence depended clusters of exotics that sent a breath of sweetness through the warm air, and seemed to mingle with the splash of a fountain that from a bed

of ferns tossed itself high as the archway that closed it in.

"I like the mere best," said Katharine to Velasquez, as they turned their backs on the guests and workmen, and side by side stood looking out on the sheet of frozen water before them.

"One can breathe here," he said; "and you will skate to-night?"

"Yes."

Her voice was lifeless—how could he tell that at heart she was passionately crying out, "Jack, Jack—my Jack"—how know that in the paper of that morning she had seen something which perhaps meant good-bye for ever to the one, the only sweetheart of her life?

Her gaze wandered out over the ice and snow with a deepening of that curious look which made Katharine Dashwood's eyes to strangers at once so lovely and so haunting that they never forgot them—the look that had slowly been growing into them year by year; just as into the eyes of those who dwell for long months on water, and seldom come into port, is gradually washed a look of the sea, but in its quietude, not its storms. And with Kitty it was the thought of Jack, always Jack, that abode with her, and shaped her life, so that perchance, though she should know him dead, his living presence would remain with her to her dying day.

"Do you skate, Mr. Velasquez?" said Mrs. Vivien, approaching the silent young pair; "and do you?" she added, turning to Kitty.

They both answered, "Yes."

"And every one will know you by your height,"

said Mrs. Vivien, carelessly, "but *I* shall be able to glide in and out like a wasp—so look out for stings!" she added, addressing Mr. Velasquez.

"Or for violent colds," said Mrs. Beaumanoir's discontented voice beside them, "though pray *who* could put on a fur cloak under a domino without looking perfectly ridiculous? And if all those windows are to be open, how are we to venture in there in ball dresses and a domino only?"

"No windows will be open," said Mrs. Vivien, "or so the carpenters say. Those who wish to skate will pass out of the room by a door at the end which is hidden behind a screen."

"The corner of which I shall take excellent care not to turn!" said Mrs. Beaumanoir, as with a reassured air she turned to reascend the incline to the house.

"And I," thought Mrs. Vivien, "will turn that corner to some advantage to-night, and if all goes well, by this time to-morrow Mallinger Dashwood will be in my power."

CHAPTER VII.

And he was stout and proud-hearted,
And thought o't bitterlie;
And he's ga'en by the wan moonlight
To meet his Marjorie.

At dinner that evening the great man unexpectedly appeared, and complained a little to his host that it was only by merest accident he had heard of the festivity to be held that night.

"It was a sudden thought," said Mr. Dashwood, "and my people have been quick in carrying the idea out, and scouring the country for guests, for they are all coming."

"Even the milkmaids!" said Lady Becky, innocently, "for I hear, sir (and she pointed a look at the great man), you have been taking lessons in milking lately."

"Oh! one or two," said Mr. B. with a wave of the hand, as one who puts behind him past follies. "But I have found the farmers' daughters in the neighbourhood very handsome, and very much in need of spiritual information."

"Also the housemaids," said Mrs. Vivian, in an audible aside.

But roused by abstinence to a keener appreciation of the good things around him, the great man presently awoke to the consciousness of unusual beauty in the air, and skipped into his mask and domino with a grace and vigour beyond the scope of a mere

ordinary Apollo a trifle beyond seventy years of age.

"Remember," said Mr. Dashwood to the ladies, before they went upstairs to spend an hour or so in putting on what might be adjusted in ten seconds, "there are to be no scraps of ribbon—no rosebuds or secret signs—we are all to be entire strangers to each other."

"And say the most cutting thing we can concoct," said Mrs. Beaumanoir; "but so far as the mere is concerned, everybody is safe from me! So you are wise," she said to Mrs. Vivien, as they went up the staircase together, and she glanced at the other's evening dress.

Mrs. Vivien laughed, and there was more laughter in her room later, only of a smothered kind, and of delicious quality, to judge by the way her maid and she enjoyed it.

No one took longer over the simple process of tying on cloak and mask that night than Mrs. Vivien, unless it might be an unfortunate gentleman whose black domino had disappeared from his dressing-room, a white one appearing in its place, with a white silk mask laid beside it.

Though small of stature, he was a true Briton in his way, and when he found that there was not a spare black domino to be had for love or money, he sent his valet on an embassy to a lady's maid, from which the man at length returned triumphant, bearing a much-flounced lady's skirt, and a pair of silk stockings and satin shoes.

To shave off a little golden moustache was the work of a few seconds, though this entailed consider-

able sorrow. But oddly enough, as the valet opened the door for the lady's exit, a lady's maid a few doors distant, covertly opened her lady's door to let out a gentleman.

Already from below arose sounds as of rapidly succeeding arrivals, but not a single voice. The many servants wore masks, and with dumb show pointed to the descent to the ball-room, or to those other brilliantly-lit rooms, in the house itself, that were open to all who chose to enter. Men and women came in like ghosts, fluttered about a little while apart or in company; then separated, probably not to meet again till supper, for the perpetual recurrence of black and white forms bewildered the gazers, and made them wish that colours had been permitted.

Half the county women came that night unwillingly, coerced thereto by their lords—the other half gladly, and resolved upon an evening of amusement that would afterwards show in their sober lives like a page torn out of the "Arabian Nights."

Even in the country, gentlemen are sometimes known to have their wits about them; and a patch here, a bow on the slipper there, may have been as cleverly followed up by them as those subtle hints that almost every great lady present had contrived to introduce into her attire.

But soon it became evident that Mr. Dashwood had not been wrong in his estimate of the attractions of the mere, for by eleven o'clock at least a couple of hundred guests, leaving the brilliant back-ground of the ball-room behind them, had stolen behind the screen and out to the half-lit darkness where masked

attendants silently strapped on their skates, then away! away! like a swallow upon air, would stream out the white domino, and swift as it, the black one would stretch out in pursuit; and the real vigour, life and enjoyment of the ball that night was under the clear stars, and not in the atmosphere that Mrs. Beaumanoir alone found supportable. The sound of music came faintly from within, through the clouded panes of the long windows, a hurly-burly of revolving figures showed to the skaters without; beyond, and flanked by the hill, showed the thousand lights of Mallinger Towers, though none were visible in the window whence Katharine looked out on the scene below. The moon had turned to solid silver all the objects on her dressing table, and the mask and domino that lay beside her; but why should she hurry to don them?

No hostess was needed, as no host was visible, and she might dream here for another two hours, so long as she appeared in her place at supper, and the carnival would wag no whit the slower or the faster for her presence. She had no secrets to hear from any one; the one sign of interest in her would be from one as lonely as herself—Mr. Velasquez. And to-morrow in early morning, *Jack*, the worthiest of all to be among the guests below, would embark in the midst of the cold and the snow.

The thought suffocated her; she sprang up, fastened on her mask, tied her domino about her, then without a conjecture as to her looks, ran down the stairs, and mingled with the black and white crowd below.

A Jesuit might have said that Mr. Dashwood had a special purpose in making all men and women alike

that night; but nobody knew the cost, skill, and thought necessary to produce this company at forty-eight hours' notice—for only on the night of Mr. Velasquez's arrival, had he resolved upon this entertainment.

Time was short, the great man's visit might perforce end on the morrow; to-night was Mr. Dashwood's opportunity, and he meant to use it.

In and out among the winged feet on the ice he flew, with a grace and skill that might have betrayed him to those who knew him best; but the black domino he pursued out-matched him, even as there always gained upon him a skater who had not for a moment lost sight of him since the ball began. Then Katharine stole out, and with skates adjusted, rushed forward with a buoyant feeling as of wings after stifling air. She was presently found by the man pursued by her father, and in Mr. Dashwood's momentary slackening of pace, he found himself overtaken, and with a disguised voice in his ear.

"Who is Mr. Velasquez? Why do you fear him?"

Mr. Dashwood looked down at the inquirer, a black domino that hardly reached his shoulder, then in an equally disguised voice said, "I believe he is the guest of our host, and a very handsome young man."

"So your daughter seems to think—look! Their height makes it impossible to mistake them! Do you mean to let him marry her?"

"That is her father's affair."

"Which is yours! Now there is some secret connected with that young man, and the story told in the drawing-room last night."

"Whose drawing-room?"

"Yours."

"Was I present?"

"No—or it would never have been told."

"Was it to his discredit?"

"The world has accepted it as truth. But there are discrepancies in it—and a woman is at the bottom of it."

"What woman?"

"Fitzhugh's wife."

"I have heard that she adored her husband."

"And hated his friend. Why?"

"Probably a pure matter of taste."

"She must have had reason. What did you say to him in the fencing-room? And what became of the letter that the butler saw pinned by the rapier to his breast? There was no blood-stain on the one found beside him."

"You are better acquainted with the details than I am."

"They will be burnt in on your heart before all is done. Why did Mrs. Fitzhugh hate you? Because she felt your passion for her a dishonour."

"Did such a passion exist?" said Dashwood, still in disguised tones. "His marriage did not point to such a conclusion."

"A marriage of pique, and one that his wife did not long survive."

"I have heard that she died of a chill."

"To her heart, probably. Supposing that you had been the poor man and Fitzhugh the rich, would the story you swore upon your oath at the inquiry be accepted?"

"The farce becomes tiresome," said the man

addressed, and the next moment was swallowed up in the crowd.

But before long, the one left behind came up with Katharine and Velasquez, and whispered into the ear of the latter, "What is your secret errand here? How are you concerned in the story told in the drawing-room last night?"

Katharine heard the voice, but not the words; she felt the hand that held hers close on it violently, and at the same moment something was crushed into her other by a black domino who flew past her and out of sight in a second.

Then she discovered herself to be alone—deserted by Velasquez, but being quickly approached on both sides. She broke swiftly away, nor seemed to draw breath till she gained her chamber. Then with madly beating heart she held the scrap of paper to the light, and knew that her instinct was true, and the message was from Jack.

"KITTY," *it said, "if you are not as false and faithless as you seem, meet me in the fencing-room at one o'clock to-night.* JACK."

She kissed the letter with a sob of joy. What mattered his unjust thoughts of her, when a word from her lips, the cling of her arms round his neck, would silence his doubts for ever?

And surely this visit meant that his orders for abroad were countermanded, that war was averted, and he would in the immediate future have the power, if not the will, to seek her, though it might be years before heart and will alike permitted her to beckon *him.*

CHAPTER VIII.

He turned him richt and round about,
As will a woman's son;
Then minded him on a little wee key,
That his mither left to him.

* * * * *

She bade him keep this little wee key
Till he was maist in need.

Mr. Velasquez had spent one unprofitable quarter of an hour in search of the domino whose words had so moved him as to drop Katharine's hand, but soon he became aware that he was himself followed, and was shortly addressed in language curiously in unison with his thoughts.

"Why are you masquerading here?" said a carefully disguised voice, "are you ashamed to bear your father's name?"

"It is one that I am proud to bear," said Velasquez.

"His death spoke his elegy," said the hollow voice.

"No," said Mr. Velasquez, as one stung at unawares, and abandoning caution, "it is left to his wife and son to speak the true one."

"So you *are* his son?"

"I am my father's son."

"And you love your host's daughter?"

Velasquez did not reply.

"*And our host loved Mrs. Fitzhugh,*" said a voice in the ear of the man who addressed Velasquez; "a woman was at the bottom of the fencing-room business, and perhaps a woman will bring the truth to light yet."

"In the devil's name," cried Dashwood, in his natural voice, and trying to seize the black domino, "who are you?"

But his hand grasped thin air. Velasquez, too, had vanished in the crowd that each moment was augmented by fresh stragglers from the ball-room.

Black dominoes grew bolder and white ones more timid, as the moment of unmasking quickly approached; but one notable example of each disappeared from the scene of action at a quarter to twelve, though shortly afterwards a lady and gentleman in plain evening dress, but masked, might have been seen descending the stairs from their chambers to the supper-room, and mingling with the crowd already assembled.

It was brilliantly lighted, and as one o'clock struck, the tallest black domino present lifted his mask, and about five hundred people followed his example.

Then broke out a sharp fire of exclamation, laughter, reproach, and there showed out a brilliant dazzle of lovely necks, and of faces all flushed with exercise and mischief, so that such a galaxy of beauty was perhaps never before met together in that one room.

But the host concerned himself principally in remarking, not the crowds present, but the disappearance of one important and one unimportant individual, to wit, his daughter and Mr. Velasquez.

Probably their absence was observed by no one but himself, as his hungry guests closed round the tables, and Mrs. Vivien's clear voice congratulated him on the success of the evening.

He looked at her keenly, but her eyes were innocent, her ball-dress crumpled, and as if it had been

worn under a domino for hours, till he began to doubt his own conviction, that this woman who had loved him fruitlessly for years, was trying to secure him irrevocably by her knowledge of the most secret passage of his life.

"Have you seen my daughter?" he said, "but no —you have not been skating—and I thought I met her once with Mr. Velasquez."

"And where are the two young people?" said Mrs. Vivien, glancing down the length of the brilliant room. "I usually find them out by their crowns, for sitting or standing they are nearly a foot higher than the tallest of either sex present!"

"They are wise, and avoid extremes of cold and heat," said Mr. Dashwood. "No doubt they will appear presently."

"But are not these extremes met in each other?" she said, innocently, "though surely Mr. Dashwood has other intentions for his heiress."

"Possibly Miss Dashwood has other intentions for herself."

"Probably. But in the absence of an old lover, there is sometimes as much danger in the presence of a new one. And there is something odd about Mr. Velasquez. Is he here in his father's name, or his mother's?"

"I never asked him."

"But to-night he has been recognized," said Mrs. Vivien, "and I suppose by some false resemblance, for I have heard him twice addressed as Fitzhugh by men who pretended to know his father."

Mallinger Dashwood shrugged his shoulders.

"What will not old men say or do?" he said,

"look at our greatest man—is he responsible for his actions? And they must be madmen, indeed, who recognize in his private secretary my old friend Fitzhugh."

"His skin is dark," said Mrs. Vivien, "but his height and the shape of his face—especially the mouth and chin—are English."

"And what, my dear lady, has this to do with me?"

"You had a good deal to do with him in life—and death; and perhaps with his widow—or wife."

"On the contrary, so little that as wife I rarely met her—and only as widow *once* when she forced herself upon me."

"And as a maid you never loved her?"

But Mr. Dashwood's reply was lost in a burst of music that just then floated through the doorway of the temporary banqueting hall, summoning the wassailers to far wilder revels than had preceded the hour of supper.

CHAPTER IX.

Tis not the frost that freezes fell,
Nor blawing snaw's inclemencie,
'Tis'nae sic cauld that makes me cry,
But my love's heart grown cauld to me.

When Katharine Dashwood stepped over the threshold of the fencing-room she found it in almost total gloom; but as she advanced, a step seemed to meet hers, and she ran forward to throw her arms round a wholly irresponsive figure, that by its very immobility astounded her. She had expected some coldness, but not to have her maidenly *largesse* so abruptly thrown back in her face; and she retreated into the darkness without a sound, though while pride dictated a total disappearance, love held her feet fast, and stayed her.

Only vaguely could she make out the profile of the man who stood motionless in an attitude of listening, and who wore the black domino and mask that had been *de rigueur* with all Mr. Dashwood's male guests that night.

The height of the figure, an indescribable something in its bearing that Jack had as surely inherited from his Fitzhugh mother, as Katharine had inherited her carriage from her father, made the girl strain her eyes upon the figure, fighting against the counter-conviction that she had made a mistake, and stolen hither but to be met by a stranger. She still wore her white domino and her mask; but her mouth was young, and the

muscles about it quivered yet, as she stood apart, her head bowed so that her height deceived the man, and he took her for one of those ladies whose advances, more or less bold, he had silently repelled during the past few days; or he had unwittingly intruded on some stolen meeting appointed by two persons who supposed the room to be the most secure from interruption of any in the house, so he turned quickly to efface himself.

But a peculiar swing of the shoulders, the very way he planted his step, convinced her that this was Jack indeed—as angry perhaps as he was jealous, and with some fresh cause of offence against her since he had pressed the note into her hand on the mere. And who else save her father knew how entrance could be effected to the room?—or who else would have the courage to come hither alone?

A sob broke from her throat; involuntarily she stretched out her hand as if to stay him, yet when he paused found no words, till once more he moved away —then she half-cried, half-faltered out—

"Would you leave me so? And when you know how I lo-love you!"

The man stood still—as one petrified body and soul.

"Why are you so angry with me?" she said. "I have to please my father, and consider his guests; but it is of you only that I think night and day."

Still he did not stir, but stood as one who doubts his own ears and heart; yet why should not this miracle be, that a young maid should fall in love as irrevocably, as hopelessly at first sight, with a young man, as in this same moment he had fallen in love with

her; and why should she be more proud than Juliet, or take shame to herself for owning it? Yet this was not the Katharine whom he had worshipped, and with no more hope of her stooping to him than a star from heaven—and perhaps something of her preciousness and beauty faded in his eyes, as in the gloom he moved towards her, and took her hand.

The grasp was warm, as was the kiss he pressed upon it, but surely she found them cold, or perhaps the shelter of his arms would have satisfied her better; for she shivered, then put up a timid hand as if to remove his mask, but he caught and held it with the other.

"I shall see you no more after to-night," she said. "Something tells me that you will never come back. However cold and angry you may be now, to-morrow you will remember that I love you—that I never loved any man but you—and that not my father nor any other, but only death, has power to part us."

"Have you been jealous, dear?" she went on after a moment's pause, and still he stood with bowed head before her, "indeed you need not be,"—and from under the white domino stole a white arm, and lifted itself to its shoulder, for she was hungry—Oh! so hungry—for a kiss of his mouth, and perhaps heaven seemed close to her, as he stooped as if about to give it, when a grinding noise, as of a key turning painfully in the lock, made them start violently apart, and with a terrified whisper of "*The fire-place!*" the girl stepped noiselessly and swift as lightning to the wall, and in the same moment that between two suits of armour a panel slid back, and gave exit to his daughter, Mallinger Dashwood stepped into the room.

He locked the door behind him, then advanced to the centre of the room, and listened intently. A moment ago he could have sworn he heard a step, but the faint light showed only the desolate perspective of floor, the richly beautiful walls upon which here and there a glint of moonlight strayed.

He wore the exact evening dress of Henry Irving in the "Corsican Brothers," a dress but little in excess of the present fashion, and his clear, cold features showed more distinctly in the half-light, than had any visible there to-night.

"So the young pair of fools have found a more agreeable place of meeting than I suspected," he said aloud, and with a carelessness that showed how habitual was his sense of immunity from all scrutiny or eavesdropping here. His voice, though low, travelled far, for he spoke as distinctly as he thought, and his worst enemy could not at any period of his life have applied to him the epithet of "unready."

He began to pace the room slowly, and on reaching the window at its end, looked out through the unshuttered pane at the crowd on the mere far below.

White and black—black and white; the eddying circles upon which the *flambeaux* flickered, produced the same feeling of monotony on his mind that they had long ago done on some of his guests; yet it was with a slight shrug of satisfaction that he turned at last from the scene, and resumed his measured walk.

Beside the fire-place he stopped and looked for some moments into the yawning darkness, then his slow steps passed on, and he paced the room twice before he again spoke, pausing close by the stain that faced the fire-place in the long, narrow room.

"So the fool has fallen in love with my daughter," he said, deliberately, "and *she* has proved as faithful as the rest of her charming sex. And the men are cousins—and curiously alike in height and carriage. Tita's son—poor Tita! (his voice took an indescribable accent)—thus goes your last hope of vengeance. Apparently he never shared your hopes—for his presence here is a mere accident, though perhaps you may have thought it a lucky one. Shall I let the pair marry—stab you through the heart a second time—take away your son as I stole from you your husband? What if he did love you—I had his company in every daylight and evening hour he could command. What if you influenced him—yet your utmost influence could not keep him for a moment from my side. You could never bend issues to your will, poor Tita; you could not even turn a man's love for you into hatred, though you tried as desperately as a starving man might strive for bread. When you scorned me most, I loved you best; when, with my wife's hand often on your arm, you met me abroad face to face, and passed me by as if I were no more, no less, than the most indifferent stranger present, I swore to break your defiance, to make you, if but for one brief moment, *mine;* you were something to beat—to subjugate—and after all, perhaps, I got the vital part of you when I took into my hand Fitzhugh's honour and his life—and the future of his young son. If I never loved you more than on the day when I asked you to be my wife, five minutes after Fitzhugh had spoken, and your transfigured face told all that I had lost and he had won, I never *coveted* you so much as when here in this room you cursed me, and with

your foot on the stain his blood had made, accused me of having murdered your husband. Did you believe it?

"And my wife must needs love you—poor Alicia, whose beauty was as water to the wine of yours—and in your fierce, grand way you loved her too, and pitied her—but, thank God, you never pitied *me*. I think that toward the last, some faint contempt stirred in you for Fitzhugh—I wish I had been by to see the blaze in your eyes when you dashed down the money on the table, and sat waiting his return. I think if they had not come to tell you he was dead, that if he had come himself, you would have hated him, and my game been won. The man who has power to rouse such force of hatred in a woman, has power to move her just as violently in an opposite direction; and once I had mastered you, you must have loved me. There was no pretence in your hatred—no touch of coquetry in your composition—you had not needed to learn a woman's first lesson, that it is only while she holds herself out of his reach, that a man will madden himself about her.

"And the woman below—that syllabub in petticoats, that froth in tulle—thinks not only to take your place in my heart, Tita, but to sit down by my hearth as my wife. She has some false clue—possibly given to her by your son. What does she expect to discover, or what does he? But if I could find you, Tita——"

His voice ceased abruptly, and with it died the note of human passion that might have made his every word a revelation to one who had seen only the callous, polished man of the world—the enemy

even of his daughter, if her interests collided with his own.

When next he spoke, he was the self known to his acquaintances, probably to every one save the beloved woman whose image was so deeply imprinted in his heart that a lifetime had not been able to obliterate it. Think you there is no green spot in the most arid heart? Find me one such heart, and I will give you for it a kingdom. For there is no such heart on earth, or perchance I might find the kingdom to give in exchange.

"A saturnalia has set in by now—I am wanted below," he said; and in a few moments he had locked the door on two men, both masked, and both in dominoes, who issued simultaneously from the fire-place, then in the faint light removed their masks to glare upon one another.

CHAPTER X.

If I had known she was beloved,
She had never been loved by me.

But if both unmasked on the instant, only one threw off his domino as if it suffocated him, or as if he wanted the free use of his right arm.

Thus disclosed, Velasquez saw a stranger, yet one whose features were curiously familiar, while Jack started violently; for in spite of the Spanish colouring, there was the mouth and chin, the height and noble air of that very Fitzhugh whose blood stained the boards upon which they stood.

"I fear I have intruded on an assignation," said Jack, fiercely, "but no doubt the lady will return—meanwhile I will withdraw."

"I had no appointment with any lady here to-night," said Velasquez.

"Then you are happier still—since she loved you sufficiently to follow you hither."

"That, sir, is none of your business."

"It may be more so than you suppose."

"I am open to conviction. Prove your right, and I will leave you to await the lady's return."

Jack laughed. To mental shock had succeeded sober reason; and if jealousy still swayed him, if he suspected that he had thrust his *billet* into the wrong hand (while Katharine's visit to the fencing-room was a previous arrangement with Velasquez), he was yet

resolved to await the issue of events, and learn the truth with his own eyes and ears from the sweet lips of Kitty, whom to doubt were worse than death.

"We will place ourselves in the hands of the lady," said Jack; "she shall choose between us, and you shall have the first chance. I will return to the fire-place—a roomy retreat, if ignominious—as soon as the least sign of her shall appear."

Velasquez stood mask in hand, outwardly cold as ice, inwardly a prey to the wildest emotions that can convulse a man's soul. To the intoxicating joy that Katharine's confession of love had given him, the touch of her hand, the very kiss that had offered itself like heaven to his lips, had rudely succeeded the shock of Dashwood's imminent approach, the hurried flight to a place of concealment, whence, every nerve on stretch from fear of detection, he had listened to the soliloquy that had but just stopped short of the truth.

The fire-place was large, the presence of another man unsuspected in that turmoil of excitement which for the moment closed his senses against everything save Dashwood's voice; and when he emerged into the room, and Jack Stormonth followed, it was with difficulty he strangled a cry. Now he was confronted with a man whom instinct told him was Kitty's lover, and the splendid gift she had but now seemed to ravish on him, dwindled to ashes when he saw himself as the false recipient, not the true.

"As you please," he said at last, so carelessly that Jack's jealous heart sank; for was not the calm strength of confidence in his rival's tone? And that this was his rival he knew well enough; had he not

from outside the ball-room witnessed Kitty's absorption in the young man on the first night they met? Had he not on the mere to-night seen how they were never more than a few minutes apart, and being named openly as lovers by the masqueraders around?

"I don't think I will retire just yet," said Jack, coolly. "Time scarcely passes so agreeably when one is waiting for another man's *possible* sweetheart as for his own. But I think I have met you before," and he looked hard at the young man with an odd feeling that some obliquity of vision gave him back his own face, but altered, as in a cracked looking-glass.

"I am Tito Velasquez—at your service."

"And my uncle Fitzhugh married *Tita* Velasquez," said Jack, in a startled voice, "so that accounts for the resemblance—and his soliloquy just now."

"And you are a Fitzhugh?" exclaimed Velasquez, stepping back.

"No—I am Jack Stormonth; my mother was a Fitzhugh—sister to the man who—died."

"But by his own hand?"

"Undoubtedly."

"There may have been a moral force that guided his will, as surely as if a physical one snatched the rapier from his hand and despatched him," said Velasquez, "and in thought and deed I hold Mallinger Dashwood guilty of my father's death."

"You have no proof," said Jack Stormonth—"in fact every tittle of evidence points the other way—even to the confidence to which we were eavesdroppers just now. I hate the man as much as—" he paused abruptly.

"You love the daughter," said Velasquez, "and I love her too."

Jack laughed again.

"Let us be frank," he said, "though our courtship need not hinder our being enemies—presently. Three days ago she loved *me*—if you have changed her fancy in that time, keep her, and try to discern your good fortune. If she has a heart—and I know she has one—she will presently come stealing back—and she shall choose between us."

Velasquez made no answer—the bitter truth was sinking into a soul inured to suffering, that in the very moment of his foregoing vengeance for the sake of love, love itself had passed him by, leaving him poorer far than when he had crossed the threshold of the room in which his father had met his death.

Katharine had fooled him—unwittingly, perhaps, but still she had fooled him—and the tide of bitterness that her supposed love for him had stayed, rushed back with overwhelming vehemence upon a heart that almost from its first beat had known but sorrow.

"There can be no question of choice between us," he said, haughtily; "probably Miss Dashwood would be as surprised at the idea as if one of her father's lackeys pitted himself against you. I entered this room as a spy—and I have met the fate that every spy deserves—detection and disgrace."

"Not disgrace!" cried Jack, touched in spite of himself, and not yet purged of some lingering doubts of his Kitty. "You came here to seek some key to the riddle of your father's death. And your mother was not the only one who swore it had never been

solved—for *mine* persists in it to this day that in spite of all the circumstantial evidence, the real truth about his death was never known."

"But it shall be," said Velasquez in a hard voice.

"How will you arrive at it?" said Jack. "You can't force *him* to speak—and by what letters or documents is it possible to convict him?"

"One letter only is needed," said Velasquez, "the letter through which my father ran his rapier, and his rapier through his heart. If this letter be destroyed there is no proof—unless a confession can be wrung from Mallinger Dashwood's lips."

"What was in the letter?" said Jack.

"Two persons only know that—a dead man and a living one. But my mother is convinced that it was forged by Dashwood in her handwriting, and substituted by him for the one brought by the butler to this room, that by some devilish ingenuity he contrived for my father to see it, and that finding in it proofs of my mother's faithlessness, and unable to survive his dishonour, he slew himself."

"This is an extraordinary theory," exclaimed Jack, startled into forgetting to listen for Kitty's step, "one that only a woman's brain could originate. I never knew until to-night there had been any question of love between them."

"The love was all on his side—if love it could be called," said Velasquez. "He asked her to be his wife, and after her marriage to his friend, pursued her with a guilty passion that seemed only intensified by her scorn of him; until at last the desperate expedient seems to have occurred to him to so humiliate

my father in her eyes, that disgust for him would throw her into the arms of her lover."

"But the cheque," cried Jack, "the forged cheque——"

"Was forged by the hand that wrote the letter," said Velasquez. "How easy for Dashwood to open the envelope addressed to my mother, take out the cheque enclosed in the note, and substitute another—how easy for him later to remove my mother's (supposed) letter from my father's dead body, and leave in its place the banker's, in which the signature to the cheque was denounced as a forgery!"

"But he swore on his oath that he had never signed the cheque," said Jack, who felt himself plunged into an unreal world, and that even Mallinger Dashwood's sudden entry would not much disturb him and—— hist! what goes there? does not a shadow move close to the wall out yonder? And whose but a woman's foot should fall so lightly that scarce can it be heard? And which of the two figures that she so softly approaches slips noiselessly towards the fireplace, so that when her eyes have pierced the gloom, she stands doubting and trembling, her heart sinking with the thought that once again she is doomed to a bitter disappointment?

CHAPTER XI.

She says—"I had rather have a kiss,
Childe Waters, of thy mouth,
Than I would have Cheshire and Lancashire both,
That lie by north and south."

I WONDER if a whirlwind, or a deluge, or an earthquake, or even the abstraction of all her clothes by a vigilant guardian will hinder a woman from keeping a love tryst, if her *heart* be set upon it? All throbbing with love, she will meet every obstacle only stubbornly to surmount it; and the more she is hindered, the more swiftly she will hurry, and the greater the danger, then the more valiantly she will cast her woman's fears behind her, and go forth to face it.

Perhaps a timid doubt that delay has made her late—*too* late—makes her step falter as at last she reaches the spot; but what are her feelings, think you, when, instead of the beloved face she has braved all to see, a stranger's features are turned upon her?

Katharine Dashwood's heart seemed to freeze under the grasp of an icy hand, as the gaze of Velasquez met her own.

If he had doubted—if for a moment he had clung to the thought that she might have forgotten Jack Stormonth for him, the hope died as, half sobbing, she stepped back.

There was a mortal ache in Kitty's heart as,

drawing her mask up to hide her face, she stood erect, knowing that by some hand, possibly this man's, she had been twice fooled that night.

"How dared you do it?" she cried a moment or two later, "to bring me here supposing I was to find Jack—*my* Jack . . . . and because you know that, you have dared to play this jest upon me. O! Jack, *Jack!*"

That cry might have summoned any lover, however backward, out of a hiding place less ignominious than a fireplace; but Jack had promised to give Velasquez a chance, and he checked himself as the latter spoke.

"I have played no jest upon you, but my presence in this room is dishonourable. I came here as a spy—on a bad errand to your father, and"—he paused—"by accident you came also, and mistook me for the man you love."

Her head was bowed; he could not see the slow tears that fell as he spoke.

"I loved you," he went on, after a second's pause, "from the moment that I first saw you. I loved you. I forgot revenge——"

"What revenge?" interrupted Katharine, lifting her face.

Velasquez looked at her. In one lightning moment the traditions of a lifetime, the first pure passion of a man, were pitted against each other, and vengeance might be sweet, but to be magnanimous, to earn but the humblest corner in her heart, were sweeter. Some day perhaps she would know—taught by her lover's lips, meanwhile——

We decide the supreme issues of our life more

easily than we choose a pair of gloves, or a colour that we fancy may suit our complexion; and there was hardly a perceptible pause between Katharine's gesture, and Velasquez's reply.

"Your father has earned my hatred," he said, "but from to-night I bear him no malice—I plot against him no more—but my condition with him shall be that he makes you happy with—Jack."

Kitty's gratitude came in a storm of sobs.

"I shall *never* see him again," she said, "and you are noble . . . . and I am grateful . . . . but you are not Jack . . . . and that is why I have liked you so; because we were both so miserable, and I supposed your case was like my own."

Velasquez took her hand very gently and reverently, and as they so stood, the sound of a key in the lock made them start, and involuntarily tighten their clasp, while their two faces turned pale and ghostly towards the intruder.

It was Mallinger Dashwood, who had returned, and closing without locking the door behind him, approached with leisurely step the two who stood full in the moonbeams, their hands tightly locked together.

He came close, politely saluted them as strangers, then affected surprise at recognizing his daughter, but there was little of the angry father in the glance he turned on Velasquez.

"You are fond of armour?" he said, "and fortunately there is a moon, by which to see it. But I should recommend your coming by *daylight*—anything interesting of which you may be in search is better discovered by day than by night."

Velasquez bowed.

"I have learned here to-night, as much as I have now the wish to learn," he said, and led Katharine to the door.

Her cloak had slipped back, his domino had been cast aside, and as slowly, as statelily as if they were about to dance a minuet together, the beautiful young pair passed hand in hand out of sight.

CHAPTER XII.

"Now Christ's curse on my head," he said,
"But I did lose by that bargain."

Mallinger Dashwood stood for a minute in an attitude of listening, after the door closed, then he crossed over and locked it, observing as he did so some obstacle lying close to the wall that, on stooping to look at, he found to be a black domino.

Had he touched the ample garment, even with his foot, the issue of this story might have been different, but he saw a cloak only, shrugged his shoulders as if at a visible fool's presence, and came slowly back to the fireplace.

"So I was right," he said aloud, as he leaned one elbow on the chimney-piece; "and for some whim, probably *his*, they must meet *here* of all places; and he forgoes his vengeance for love, for love, poor wretch! He must have been here when I came first; I *felt* a presence in the room, but he heard no more than Tita may have told him"—he turned sharply as at some sudden thought, and touched a Russian helmet that hung close to his right hand, and from whose misshapen jaws he drew a paper, and stood looking down on it fixedly. The characters traced upon it would have been faint by day, and in this dim light were quite undecipherable, even if a

broad stain (torn through its centre) did not mar them.

"And if the fool had found it, what then?" he said, half aloud, "what then? It could have proved nothing, and as it is, Tita's son knows as little as Tito's mother."

He replaced the paper, the jaws closing on it with a peculiar snapping sound—a sound carefully committed to aural memory by an unseen auditor.

"A spy—and she stoops to flirt with him. And Jack Stormonth"—he laughed aloud—"odd that he should be cut out by his own cousin. So there's another unfaithful woman—yet I could have sworn she was immovable as I, both in love and hate. If she reads her paper, she must beware that he sails with his regiment at any moment, but knowing the impossibility of their meeting, she feels no more divided from him thus, than if he remained in England. Meanwhile—*elle s'amuse.* And Jack Stormonth is scarcely the man to go shares with another in a woman's favour. He shall have some news before long of his Kitty—and you, Tita, will receive some of your son. Mr. B. goes to-morrow, but he will leave here—Mr. Velasquez."

He moved towards the centre of the room, and stood looking down angrily at the invisible stain at his feet.

"A coward's blood!" he said with an accent of bitter contempt; "you left her alone; you almost deserted, while you loved her, and then you must put a shameful end to your existence, and leave her to bear the dishonour of it. Tita, Tita! I would have loved you better, I would have shielded you better

than that! And you *remember* me—the undying hate that looks at me out of your son's eyes tells me that. I can move you yet, I can make your heart throb, and your eyes flash—while perhaps, little by little, gradually shrouded in a faint contempt, a chill pity, you have forgotten—him. I will see that look, I will hear your voice before I am many days older; your son's presence here gives me the clue to you that for twenty-three years I have sought in vain. You must be nearly forty years old; perhaps you are not beautiful now, but you are Tita."

He walked to the window, and looked out. The mere was deserted, and only the waning light of the moon glimmered coldly over its expanse; early morning was at hand, but without a visible streak of daylight.

"To-morrow this rotting shutter shall be replaced with a whole one," he said, still speaking in the soliloquy that he habitually indulged in here. "The door shall be barred, the panel securely closed against sweethearts and spies."

Near the door he paused, and looked down on the dim outlines of the voluminous black domino, flung down as in haste against the wall.

"Fool!" he muttered, then unlocked the door and passed out on the other side; the key grated in the lock, and once more the fencing-room was silent as the grave.

CHAPTER XIII.

He neither kist her when he cam'
Nor clappit her when he gaed,
And in and out at her bower window
The moon shone like the gleed.

SCARCELY was the silence established than once more it was broken.

Not by Jack; he still knelt on one knee, half expecting Dashwood's return, with one intense bitter feeling dominating all the confusion of his mind—that Kitty had come, had gone, had spoken with his rival once, twice, and *he*, poor fool, poorer Jack, had not even spoken to her, had not even kissed her! And within two hours he must be at the railway station; within twenty-four he might have embarked, and he was as powerless to reach her by word or letter as if already the bullet she had feared for him were buried in his breast.

"Kitty!" he whispered passionately, and cursed himself for having put Velasquez forward, wasting in doubt of her the precious moments that she should have passed in his arms; and then his pulse stood still, his limbs became rigid as light steps approached the fireplace, and a figure (how in that moment could he tell if it were short or tall?) advanced almost to within reach of his hand.

But in the next second he knew that this was not

Katharine. The bodily sense of that one beloved presence was absent, and mingled with the bitter disappointment of his rashly kindled hopes came the impatient thought that he might as well have chosen the ball-room to-night for a trysting-place, as this desolate spot, to which all the world seemed to be hurrying on each other's heels!

If love had brought three young people hither, and fear or habit, Mallinger Dashwood, it was clear that neither love nor fear swayed the mind of this new visitor, but rather an apish curiosity as to the insides of the gaping and grinning helmets, and *pots-de-fer* securely fastened to the wall and against the mantel-shelf. He heard a match struck, saw a flicker of its light on a man's domino that swept the floor, caught the click and jar of more than one lifted and falling visor, then, as the match died out, heard a sharp, half-stifled exclamation, and the faint rustle of paper, followed by a snapping sound as of steel meeting steel.

The next moment flesh met flesh, for another hand had folded over the one that held the paper, and as, with a half shriek, the thief struggled to get free, Jack issued from the fireplace and dragged the figure along with him to the window.

"So you are one of Dashwood's spies?" said a voice surprisingly clear and high, considering the male garb visible beneath the domino, while a disengaged hand fetched him the soundest box on the ear that he had enjoyed since childhood.

"No—I'm only going to be his son-in-law," said Jack, imperturbably; "and so you're a woman," he added, looking at the man's hat, the close hair,

the mask and domino—all masculine save the voice that revealed, and the woman's temper that betrayed her.

"How do you know that?" she said, sullenly.

"Men never box other men's ears, and women always tuck their thumbs *inside* their fingers when they hit out—not from the shoulder. Allow me"—and he took the little rosy hand, turning it palm upwards, in which the nails were clenched over the stolen papers—"I must unlock these, and you can punish me with the other hand at your leisure."

"They are no more yours than mine," she said, between her teeth, "and you are telling me a lie—she loves Mr. Velasquez."

Jack laughed.

"How long have you been here?" he said, still keeping a firm grasp of her hand.

She neither moved nor spoke.

"Probably it was *you* who brought Mr. Velasquez here to-night," he said slowly, as one who thinks aloud, "and perhaps he came as no spy—but only by accident, to hinder me and my sweet Kitty from being happy."

"You have little care for the young lady's reputation," said the black domino, with a sneer.

"It needs none," said Jack, carelessly: "if all the women on earth disgraced their names, there would be one exception to the rule, and that would be my Kitty. And in the interests of Kitty's father"—he dexterously unlocked her fingers—"I will relieve you of these."

She stamped her foot with fury as she felt her hand empty, and knew that the secret knowledge by

which she had meant to coerce Dashwood to her will, had been snatched from her before she had even mastered it.

"If you had a knife in your hand, you would kill me now," he said, laughing, though with little mirth, "but before I go, I should like to know if you are in love with Velasquez—or with my future father-in-law?"

"You are rash," she said, sullenly, "for I can do her, and you, more harm than you suppose."

"You can't," he said, carelessly, "for she is Kitty, and I am Jack—and as we've got each other's good opinions, we don't trouble ourselves about other people's."

He threw open the window as he spoke, and making as if to get out, he turned suddenly, and had removed the mask and was peering into her face before she guessed his intention.

"I like to know Kitty's enemies and mine," he said, "and so good-night—and I wish—I wish to God you were Kitty."

Then he shut the window between them, and hanging to the tough ivy, began that precipitous descent to the ground upon which none but a man with surest eye and foot might venture, but swiftly as he went, it seemed to him that he had made the ascent more swiftly still, with the heart bounding in his breast at the thought of Kitty, while now it lay icy and starved as a babe that famishes for want in its cold and deserted cradle.

CHAPTER XIV.

The hose and shoon were git, my man's,
They cam' first to my hand;
And I've ravelled a' my yellow hair,
Coming against the wind.

At breakfast next morning Mr. B. announced his imminent departure, but as he was bent on returning, if only for a day or two, before the party broke up, he ventured to commit Mr. Velasquez to the kind hospitality of his host during the few days that would intervene.

"You could not leave my daughter and myself a more charming hostage for your return," said Dashwood, and Velasquez bowed, and Katharine looked at her father.

"By the way," said Mrs. Vivien, turning her languid eyes on the two young people, who, as usual, sat side by side, "how does the fencing-room look by moonlight—by very shabby moonlight—for it must have been almost morning when I saw you both returning from an inspection of the armour?"

"It was only half-past three," said Dashwood. "I looked at my watch when they left me."

All within ear-shot glanced at Katharine and Velasquez. Mrs. Vivien shrugged her shoulders.

"*Chacun à son goût,*" she said, "but I should scarcely have thought a room where a murder—or was it a suicide?—had been committed, was a cheerful spot for a promenade on a freezing January night!"

"I fancy a good many people feel chilled inside this morning," said Lord Noll, cheerfully. "Put a mask and domino on some people and they turn into wasps, and go about stinging everybody. At supper some of the faces were as long as hatchets!"

Mrs. Vivien laughed.

"Was yours one of them?" she said.

"Oh no! Somebody told me I was a fool; I said I knew it; another, that without my mask I was ugly enough to frighten a horse. I told him I did not possess a looking-glass for nothing. A third informed me that my grandfather was a greengrocer. I gave him my word of honour that he was a tallow-chandler. A fourth accused me of trifling with the feelings of a lady for whom I have a—a great respect, and transferring them to a lady who—who"—in spite of himself he stole a look at Katharine, who seemed lost in thought.

"Doesn't want them," said Mrs. Vivien; "and you," she added, turning to her host, "were any home-truths fired off at *you?*"

"No; only some clumsy guesses," he said negligently; "but can any one tell me who was the lady in a man's mask and domino, and who the gentleman disguised as a lady last night?" He had raised his voice a little, and his voice travelled to the end of the long table and checked the conversation then going forward, producing a violent increase of colour in the face of a gallant warrior who had mysteriously lost all hirsute appendages since yesterday.

A burst of laughter greeted this spontaneous confession of his guilt, and Lady Becky exclaimed:

"So that explains it!"

"What?" said Mrs. Vivien.

"I hope you didn't find my cheek very rough, sir," said the young man, turning to Mr. B., who had suddenly devoted himself to his plate; "but I assure you——"

"That more than one lady present might have envied you," said Lady Becky, maliciously; "but if you were the lady, pray who was the gentleman?" and she glanced round the table.

"I don't know," said the perplexed warrior. "All I can say is, my man found my mask and domino gone, and a woman's white one laid out instead, and rather than stay upstairs during the fun, I accepted the situation."

"But your petticoats?" cried one.

"Your wig?" ejaculated another.

"Your shoes?"

"One of the ladies' maids found the first, the housekeeper the second, but the third was a twister, though we got over that in time."

"Does any woman here own to number seven shoes?" said Lady Becky, darting an impertinent smile at a beautiful *blonde* who was present, perfect as far as one could see, and who might even have perfect feet—had the world ever been privileged to behold them.

"They were black satin," continued the warrior, "and when they burst, which of course they did, it didn't matter much, as I'd got on black silk stockings——"

"By Jove you had!" said Lord Dolly, in an audible aside, "that stuck halfway up your leg."

"I'm afraid they showed," said the son of Mars,

apologetically; "you see, when I saw people being spilled right and left, I naturally skated off to assist —and of course I hitched up the petticoats—and that domino was so confoundedly short!"

"And which sex profited most by your assistance?" said Lady Becky.

"Oh! yours," he said readily. "I went to them by instinct — and none of them were in the least grateful. One woman, as soon as she regained her feet, slapped my face."

"But Mr. B. consoled you," said Mrs. Vivien, sweetly.

"It was only a temporary infidelity to the milk-maid," whispered Lord Noll in her ear. "He was up at seven this morning to assist her in the dairy."

"But what became of your domino?" cut in Mrs. Vivien sharply, "and which of us women had the bad taste—and the height—to wear it?"

"I think her maid took tucks in it," said the warrior in perfect good faith; then looking around and catching the feminine glances—some indignant, some hurt, and all with one exception sincerely innocent—turned upon him, he coloured to his brows, and looked the picture of misery.

"Why are you all so angry with me?" he said. "It was a good joke—and which ever of you did it, carried the thing out with uncommon spirit!"

"It must have been one of our maids," said Mrs. Vivien, serenely, "but it could not have been mine. She waited on me more than once during the evening. And no doubt in the servants' hall, enough county scandal is discussed to enable one of these people to plant a sting where it was certain to be felt."

"But wasps sometimes sting from mere fury—or folly," said Dashwood.

"This one didn't," said Lord Noll, with a chuckle. "I shall never forget one country matron who nearly choked after a whisper in her ear, and stamping her skate, cried out, '*Me!* the mother of nine children!' And she upset herself, and I picked her up—and she swore that *I* was the woman who had uttered the vile calumny," said the unwilling victim to petticoats, "and she nearly had my wig and mask off before I could back out!"

"But of course you didn't venture to *speak?*" said Lady Becky, with some curiosity.

"Not I. I nodded, giggled—once or twice forgot to be ladylike, and punched one or two heads. I'm afraid I punched yours, sir," he added, turning to Mr. B., not without malicious intent, but the great man's chair was empty; he had noiselessly withdrawn.

"He has gone to say good-by to the milkmaid," said Lady Becky.



CHAPTER XV.

Oh gin I had a bonny ship,
And men to sail wi' me;
It's I wad gang to my true love,
Sin' he winna come to me!

At Mallinger Towers nothing but the unexpected was permitted to happen, so that when after the great man's departure, a servant announced that donkeys were at the door, no one expressed surprise, and all the women went to put on their hats and jackets, while each man went to pick out the best beast for his present charmer.

Velasquez was the first in the field, and had secured the strongest and handsomest animal long before Katharine appeared; Lord Noll was the next luckiest, and so by infinitesimal degrees of excellence (for they were all nearly as big as mules), each ass found a temporary owner, and when the ladies descended, they found as smart a set of grooms in waiting as they could well have wished.

Only Mrs. Vivien frowned when she saw Noll at her bridle-rein, and she turned quickly to their host, exclaiming:

"Don't you come with us?"

"I join you later," he said, as he settled her in the saddle, "and hope to find fresh roses in your cheeks. Your steed is humble," he added, with a

slight smile, "but a more ambitious one could not have kept his feet a moment on the iron-bound roads."

He moved away as he spoke, and almost immediately the cavalcade started, and without confusion, since every *cicisbeo* held his lady's bridle-rein, and if more than one errant glance strayed to Velasquez in envy, he did not know it, as he led Katharine's beast slowly down the hill.

Probably conversation can never be more agreeably conducted that when a woman rides at ease, and a man walks beside her, his head about on a level with her shoulder. They are alone, but they enjoy the pleasure of movement; the air, the changing scene, act as a gentle stimulus to their thoughts and looks; and no better opportunity could be found in which to converse, in the real sense of the word, or to murmur those words of folly that sometimes outweigh in value the whole world's riches.

I think I should reckon real conversation as the chief intellectual pleasure in life. To hear, to see, to receive; to have lips, eyes, soul, all speaking to you at once, and to feel the power in yourself to respond to, to echo such speech; to be swayed by a brilliant fancy, thrilled by a noble thought, satisfied by a happy allusion—Ah! How dull after such reading is the printed page, how unsatisfying Nature's most perfect one, since into it there is breathed no heart!

But conversation as an art did not flourish among Mallinger Dashwood's guests. They could easily flirt without speaking, but few of them could speak without flirting, and perhaps the only two who occasionally conversed were Velasquez and Katharine. From the first moment of their meeting there had been a

curious bond between them, and whether they remained silent when together, or spoke little or often, there was a sense of repose, of pleasure, that each found missing in the society of others.

But the man's heart had spoken out boldly to his face from the first moment in which he beheld Katharine, and was he to be blamed if her gentle, serious attitude of liking towards him seemed to indicate dawning love? He had never heard of Jack Stormonth, and within five minutes of his introduction to her, a male gossip had told him she was fresh from school.

Some men might have wondered at a girl's school fetters lasting till she was nineteen and a half, but Velasquez realized nothing save that she was his enemy's daughter, and that at first sight he had fallen in love with her. How could he tell that her withdrawal from the frivolous society around, was the natural shrinking from interruption of a preoccupied mind, or that in his quiet strength and reserve she found a haven to which she might flee, and be at leisure to *think*?

Perhaps if men knew how much more they charm women by their reticence than by their foolish vows, they would for the greater part become mute, and practise eloquence by their features alone. The silence that is without stupidity, the look that needs no word to second it, is better than any language ever spoken, and Katharine had unconsciously turned from uncongenial surroundings to repose herself mentally upon one who never taxed, and never wearied her.

Those other men whose bold glances pursued her, only awoke in her a cold, proud anger that she

scorned to display, and her manner had already assumed the dignity of a middle-aged woman rather than the spontaneous gaiety of a girl. But while the women said "She is dull!" each man thought of how glorious the awakening would be for—Velasquez.

More silent than usual were the two who led the way down the hill, and through the village, where every cottage furnished its contingent to behold the latest of Mallinger Dashwood's "whims."

The clear air, the smalt blue sky above, and the whiteness all around and below, made a brilliant set-off to the costumes that, sufficiently good for asses, lent more colour to the scene than if the stereotyped hat and habit were alone visible.

"Lord!" said one of the village women, "it minds me of the times when ladies always wore their best bonnets when they went a-horseback—and a deal decenter and handsomer they looked with their strings tied under their chins, than in the men's 'ats they wear now-a-days!"

But there was not a village maid present that day who would not cheerfully have worn a bonnet, and ridden an animal that she profoundly despised, if its bridle-rein were held by such a swain as now strode merrily beside it.

All the women save Katharine were laughing at the novelty of the situation. The cold had brought bloom to their cheeks, and fresh lustre to their eyes; their coquettish hats and braided jackets, of dark blue, of red, of white, the charming little feet revealed by their short skirts, all combined to render them more dangerous in this unexpected guise than when most fully equipped for conquest.

Not a soul, save Katharine, knew where the ride was to end. There was an Arcadian air of simplicity over the jaunt that deceived even some of those worldly people into thinking that such primitive amusement was preferable to the mechanical rise and fall, the measured beat of fashionable life, and sentiments that would have been virtuous if directed towards the right quarter, began to animate more than one fair breast.

"What a good woman I could have been, Noll," said Mrs. Vivien, sighing, "if I had married a man like Dashwood, with the village people to look after, and a donkey to ride now and then!"

"You're much better as you are," said Lord Noll, tersely, and Mrs. Vivien sighed, perhaps with some real compunction, at the thought of an announcement she would probably have to make to him within a few days.

Low ripples of laughter, a hum of pleasant voices followed Velasquez and Katharine as they ascended the slight hill that gave exit from the village, but not a word passed between the pair till the level road was reached, and only the white hedge-rows stood on either hand to listen.

Then Katharine spoke.

"Why do you stay?" she said, abruptly.

He made her no reply, but looked straight before him.

"We have been friends," she said, slowly; "from the first moment that we met, I think that we were friends, and yet you are here as my father's enemy, and as a spy."

He bowed his head as if in assent, but still preserved silence.

"And pray," she went on with a ring of anger in her proud voice, "what could you know about—Jack? I suppose some of the people here must have gossipped to you, and perhaps you thought it a fine thing to decoy me to the fencing-room."

Velasquez turned and faced her with eyes as proud as her own.

"No," he said, "I did nothing to bring you there; and the room is yours. You have the right to enter it any hour of the day or night, but I—have no right."

"Then who forged the letter?" cried Katharine. "The letter in his dear handwriting, and thrust into my hand on the mere by a man taller than any other present, save you and my father?"

"Perhaps it was your father," said Velasquez, who, after long and stubborn thought, had resolved that he would not put Katharine to the torment of knowing that Jack had been waiting for her last night, so that only by unlucky accident they had escaped the mingled bliss and misery of being clasped in each other's arms.

She started violently at Velasquez's suggestion, and turned white as the snow around them.

"Then he knew—he knew it all along," she half whispered aloud, "and there is a year and a half to wait—and if he is not killed in battle, and comes back, there is nowhere that I can see him, that I can speak to him. Jack—*Jack!*"

Her lips trembled, her cheeks paled, great tears of longing dimmed her lovely eyes; then her head sank, and in a gentle, timid voice she said:

"Have I ever said, or looked, or done anything to make you suppose that I should speak to you as I

spoke last night—unless I had thought you were somebody else?"

In spite of his wretchedness, Velasquez smiled at the *naïveté* and confusion of the question.

"You have never given me the faintest hope of such good fortune as seemed to fall to my lot last night," he said gravely, "but to the man who loves, all things are possible, even to the belief that a woman is as capable of a sudden and faithful a passion as himself."

"Perhaps that is true," said Katharine, in a low voice: "and a woman's pride is melted in her love; but only when he has declared his. And when I sued to you" (the hot blood painted all her face) "did you not feel a sense of shame and disappointment in me, ranking me with those—those women who are following us?"

"They are not women; they are butterflies," said Velasquez, with contempt. Then with a sudden change of voice, "I only thought—O, madman!—that knowing me so far beneath you, it had pleased you to stoop, like the angel that you are, and save me from those schemes of hatred and revenge that have embittered and overshadowed my life."

Katharine's self-consciousness faded; her colour sank; she forgot the burning sense of shame for herself, of irritation against him that had succeeded her gentle attitude to him the night before; and looking at him, she was struck with the traces of habitual suffering that his face betrayed.

"My father has inflicted some wrong on you or yours?" she said, slowly.

"I cannot tell you," he answered in the same

tone. "But henceforward I work for you and Stormonth; and my revenge, if I ever take it, will touch neither your happiness nor his."

Katharine bent her brows as one puzzled; at last she spoke:

"I am trying to understand," she said. "When last night I—I made love to you, thinking you were Jack, you—you were on the point of returning my advances, when my father's approach separated us. When I returned later (and surely it is a shameful thing for a girl to go twice in the dead of night to meet her lover) you had changed; you had no happy airs; you seemed to find it natural that I had mistaken you for Jack; and, accepting the situation, you even swore to help us." She paused, then added in a lower tone, "Such conduct was not natural."

Velasquez turned and looked at her. For a moment all the fierce, passionate love he had for her surged upwards from his heart to his eyes, and he said to himself that he would respect neither Jack Stormonth's rights, nor any other man's, but win her—ay, and keep her in the face of all.

But those eyes of Kitty's, so proud, so true, checked his madnesss. He knew that it was only for Jack she looked thus. Had not a new sweetness, an adorable loveliness come to her when she had lifted her arms to draw him towards her, for that kiss which now was as far away from him as if worlds divided them?

"You are right," he said; "such conduct was unnatural. Some day, perhaps, I may be able to explain it. You asked me just now why I remain here, and others must share your surprise. To be left behind as Mr. B.'s paid servant, minding his

goods and chattels like any extra or casual valet, and with less than a valet's welcome."

"You were not born to be the servant of any man," said Katharine, looking at him, haunted by some vague resemblance to Jack, that extended even further than the similar carriage of the shoulders, and the height that had deceived her overnight.

"No," he said, "I was born to something worse —dishonour!"

She barely caught the last word, for it was almost drowned in a shout of "Velasquez! Velasquez!" from the nearest *cicisbeo* in the rear.

Katharine turned in her saddle, and looked back. The bright cavalcade moved more slowly than at starting; most of the women were tired of a new sensation, and only hedgerows were there to admire, and the keen air had made them eager for luncheon, though it was not yet one o'clock.

"Where are we going?" cried out Lord Dolly.

"Here," said Katharine, and Velesquez stopped to unfasten a gate that led by a narrow road, deep with ruts, to a farm-house visible in the distance.

Then ensued cries, exclamations, convulsive clutches at support more substantial than bridal-reins, as the asses floundered, and stumbled in the ruts, so that Mallinger's guests reached the farm-house in various graceful attitudes of affection, to the delight of the farm servants, who had no idea that "quality" husbands could be so attentive to their wives.

Katharine alone required no assistance, and had shaken hands with the house-mistress before the others came up.

Half a dozen of Dashwood's servants were in waiting, and hurried forward.

Beyond the ample house-place showed a large and cheerful kitchen, with a blazing fire that seemed to throw red lights on the crystal and silver of the long table that faced it, and more than one woman uttered a sigh of relief as she lifted her skirts to warm her feet by the burning logs. Soon hats were removed, and the splendid *chevelures* of gold, of black, of brown, and bronze, struck admiration into the soul of the farmer's daughter, as in the background she gazed upon them.

Meanwhile, the strings of immense onions festooned from the roof, the half-cured hams, the great flitches of bacon, the evidences on all sides of the rough plenty that the house contained, amused these fine ladies to the temporary oblivion of their appetites, and they flitted about like birds, and would have extended their researches to the dairy had not one of the servants advanced to inform them that luncheon was served.

"Do we not wait for Dashwood?" said Mrs. Vivien, raising her brows as Katharine seated herself, and Velasquez took the place at her right hand.

Perhaps the cold had made Katharine a little deaf, for she did not answer the question, busying herself entirely with those slight duties, as hostess, that at the Towers she scarcely needed to exercise at all. But to-day, in her father's absence, she chose to assume them with as much heartiness as grace. She recommended certain excellent farm-house dishes to her guests, and echoed the murmured delight of the farmer's wife, when her guests screamed at the sight of, but found sucking-pig, delicious.

It was in the midst of a burst of laughter that

the door unclosed, and Dashwood, pale in his dark riding dress, stood before them. Beyond the open house-place his black horse, flecked with foam and streaming with perspiration, was visible, its bridle secured to the wood-work of the porch.

"You are late," cried Mrs. Vivien, gaily; "come and sit beside me, and you shall have some pig."

He nodded to his daughter, but did not look at Velasquez as he sat down by Mrs. Vivien, and declining her offers of a newly discovered delicacy, asked for one of those everyday articles of diet to which he was accustomed.

The servants had forgotten nothing, and served their master as perfectly as if he sat at his own table; but more than one of those discreet servitors saw mischief in his air, and in the glance that from time to time he turned on Katharine and Velasquez in the midst of the light talk he scattered around him.

Soon the party broke up into little groups, and began to explore the farm-house and its surroundings. The servants had withdrawn, and only Dashwood and Mrs. Vivien were left in the kitchen, standing on opposite sides of the hearth, and as the door closed, their eyes met.

"And how do you find the fencing-room by moonlight?" he said.

For a moment her colour faded, though her glance did not quail before him, then she said:

"I find it very well. But if one did not know the trick of the sliding panel, one might find it awkward to be locked in—by one's host."

Did a lightning expression of relief cross his features as she spoke? She could scarcely tell, con-

founded as she was by the unexpectedness of the attack, and with all her previously laid plans routed by some intelligence she had gathered from the newspaper just before starting that morning.

"I have sent your domino to your maid," he said, negligently. "I think it must be the one—with a great many tucks in it—that Major Georges was speaking of at breakfast."

She made no reply; he could only see her profile as she stood looking down at the blazing logs at their feet.

"Had I known that you intended to honour my poor room, I would have provided a fire for you, and a chair," he said, "or rather three chairs, as, like yourself, Mr. Velasquez and my daughter seemed bitten with a taste for observing my armour last night."

"It is very beautiful," she murmured, "and I have a weakness for observing armour—and lovers, so I followed Mr. Velasquez and your daughter in. Naturally they were too much engaged with each other to hear or perceive my entrance, and I had no idea of intruding on their conversation. My domino was large—and I am small—I wrapped myself in its folds, meaning to lie *perdu* until the room should be vacant. But my hearing is acute; I heard all, while I saw nothing. And then you entered." She paused, and for the first time since she had begun to speak, looked at him.

"And your hearing being so acute, and my voice even more distinct than my daughter's, you kindly listened to my—wanderings," he said, "and no doubt *modesty* hindered your coming forward to give me the

pleasure of your company. For you know I am a little fastidious about women, and their charm is gone when I see them masquerading as men."

Their eyes were held together now in a keen, searching look. Long ago he and she had measured swords, and a quite inadequate bargain had been struck between them, for if she had once slightly fixed his fancy, he had fixed her regard, and while *he* had forgotten, *she* had remembered, with the one supreme passion of a lifetime.

But if love could not hold him, a secret power might, and after many years of seeking for the one vulnerable spot in his soul, she thought she had discovered it on the evening when he came face to face with Mr. Velasquez.

"Why will you treat me as an enemy?" she said at last, in the voice of one who rather supplicates, than imposes conditions.

"I could never be yours," he said gravely; "but you treated me as one, when, under cover of a disguise, you crept constantly to my elbow last night, whispering mysterious questions, innuendoes, doubts."

"But the doubts are at an end," she said, boldly, "and a scrap of paper taken from a Russian helm——"

"Is quite at your service," said Dashwood, adding, as the door opened, and a confusion of voices and approaching steps became audible, "a lady's thefts are always forgotten."

"Not if her theft included his honour," said Mrs. Vivien, in a very low voice.

"No man could wish to place his honour in safer hands," said Dashwood, as he turned to look at the first person who entered, a beautiful young girl carry-

ing carefully a dish of curds and whey, which she almost dropped on discovering the presence of the lord of the manor. She managed, however, to courtesy very gracefully, and to deposit the bowl on the table without any of the male assistance, that was so perseveringly offered by Major Georges and Lord Dolly. Her eyes were bright with anger, and her round soft cheeks rosy with rage; if she had dared, she would have soundly cracked these gentlemen's heads with her wooden ladle, for they had been chaffing her, and she was no match for their satirical banter. They had found out that she was one of the objects of the great man's admiration, and that her *soul* stood in ardent need of his prayers, personally conducted of course, but that her mother objected to such intercessions, and had actually threatened him with a broomstick if he came "loping round" any more.

"With eyes like gimlets, and his trousers trodden into rags at his heels, Miss Katharine," said the farmer's wife, "to come round my Dolly like as if he was courting her, and he an old gentleman who ought to be saying prayers for himself, or for the country he's tried to be the ruin of!"

Katharine laughed.

"Dolly can take care of herself," she said; "and he is very harmless, both in politics and love."

They had lingered in the dairy together, and this was the first word they had got alone that day, and now the old servant whispered:

"And as for love, Miss, have you and Master Jack kept true to each other?"

"Yes," said Kitty, softly.

"And is the master as much against it as ever?"

"He is just the same."

"And have you seen him since you came back, Miss?"

"Once . . . . and, and I shall never see him again."

"You haven't quarrelled, Miss Kitty?" said the woman, anxiously.

"No, but have you not heard? His regiment is ordered abroad on active service."

"*Yes*, Miss, *yes*," said the farmer's wife, briskly; "but haven't you got the news this morning?"

"What news?" said Katharine, stopping short with hand pressed to her heart.

"The war's over, so Master Jack needn't go. My man got it from Stormonth Hall an hour before you came."

"Oh!" sighed Kitty, in a long, long sigh of joy. Then she put both arms around the woman's neck, and kissed her.

"Thank you, Miss Kitty," said the latter, gently. "I'll tell Master Jack that when I see him. And perhaps you'll be seeing him yourself soon."

"Across the width of a church, perhaps," said Kitty, rather ruefully, "but nowhere else. I have made a promise, Mary, and I must neither send him a message, nor write him a letter, nor make a tryst with him——"

"Nor yet keep one?" said Mary, her shrewd, kind eyes fixed on the girl's face; "but if you break your word or no, I'm glad you kept *that* one in the fencing-room the other night."

"Did Mr. Stormonth tell you that?" said Katharine, proudly.

"How else could he have got to you, Miss, except through me? Who but me, having lived in service fifteen years at the Towers, knows the ins and outs of the fencing-room, or how 'twas possible for Master Jack to get into it? And who but me could have got the letter safe to your hand, when every servant in the house has got his orders about you?"

Katharine coloured brilliantly.

"So my father does not trust me," she said half aloud.

"Well, Miss Kitty," said Mary, "when Master Jack rushed in here all pale and distracted about five o'clock that afternoon, and said he must see you or die before he went abroad, (for he only got my letter that morning saying master had brought you back to the Towers), and how there was only one safe place he knew of, and that was the fencing-room, and could I get a note to your hand within an hour, I put on my cloak and hood, and he just hitched me up on his arm, and bundled me along through the snow, for it was dark as pitch. So that I was breathless when I got into the housekeeper's room, with his letter safe in my pocket. I knew that if the master caught me taking anything to you, he would turn my man out of the farm at the first opportunity, so I was puzzled how to manage it, for your maid might find it first if I hid it among your clothes, or put it on your table. Just then your little pug trotted into the room, and a thought struck me. The housekeeper had been called away, and picking up the dog I stole, by ways I knew of, to your corridor and knocked at your door. You said, 'Come in!' and I half opened it and said, 'Are you alone, Miss?' and

you said, 'Yes.' Then I put the letter into the dog's mouth, and pushed him into the room. I heard you get up and make an exclamation; then I pulled the door close, and ran down for my life. After I came down, the housekeeper said, 'Miss Katharine will be vexed not to have seen you, Mary, but master does not allow any one to see her without his express permission.' But I told her I had no doubt you would be coming to see me one of these days, little thinking how soon that would be. But all last night I was quaking for fear lest he'd be caught up at the Towers."

"Last night!" said Kitty, turning very pale; "but he had gone back to rejoin his regiment, and men do not get leave when they are under marching orders. I could not think how he got that one night."

"His Colonel and General Stormonth are old friends," said Mary. "Perhaps that accounts for it. But the morning after Master Jack got back to his regiment, a telegram came saying the General was dying, so off he started here again, but by the time he gets to the Hall, the General is better, and quite out of danger."

Katharine stood pale and breathless, looking through the diamond-shaped panes of glass at the afternoon now quickly closing in, that a few moments ago had shown to her like the opening of a fresh spring morning.

"I was sitting by the fire knitting," went on Mary, "about nine o'clock last night, when the door opened, and who should walk in but Master Jack! He'd got on a coat above his evening dress, and over his arm some loose black thing that he told me was a domino, and then he showed me a mask, and said he

was going up to the Towers to join in the masked ball, where he could get a word with you, and nobody be the wiser. He looked pale, and said, 'It's a fine thing to go straight from a sick-bed to a ball, isn't it, Mary? But the dear old father's better, and she is first, she always *must* be first with me.' Then he went away, and when I got the message this morning from the Towers that the house party would require the use of the kitchen for luncheon, my heart sank, for I thought the master had found it all out, and was coming here to punish me. But I saw at once by your face that it was all right," added Mary, briskly; "and now you'll be happy, knowing he is safe at home."

Katharine turned suddenly. Mr. Velasquez was on the threshold; apparently he had been waiting without for her during this interview, and his patience was growing exhausted. For the first time the patient, steady attendance on her that both he and she had come to accept as natural, jarred suddenly and violently on Katharine, and showed her in a false position to her own eyes.

"I will come presently," she said coldly, and he bowed and went out.

"Who is that gentleman, Miss Kitty?" exclaimed Mary, sharply; "but there's no need to ask his name, only how came he to be stopping in your father's house?"

"That is Mr. Velasquez," said Kitty, too absorbed in her thoughts to notice Mary's tone.

"No, it is Mr. Fitzhugh," said Mary, with growing excitement; "whatever he may call himself, he's a Fitzhugh. Don't I know their faces as well, and

even better than the Dashwoods'? And that gentleman is the living image, except for complexion and black eyes, of the Fitzhugh who was killed—who died, I mean, in the fencing-room at the Towers. And I'll swear that he is of the same blood and race as Master Jack."

Katharine started. For a minute she stood looking down, and thinking deeply, then a light flashed over all her features, and she coloured as if with shame, but not for herself, and lifted her head proudly.

"If he is a Fitzhugh, Mary, he has different ideas of honour to—Master Jack. Perhaps he takes after his father——" and then she stopped, hating herself for the ungenerous speech, and moved to return to the house.

"Are you quite so sure, Miss Kitty, that he *was* so dishonoured?" said Mary, curiously. "I was your mother's maid then, and I saw him often——" she paused, and a peculiar expression crossed her face.

"Let us go in," said Katharine, "or my father will suspect us."

At the kitchen door they parted, and Velasquez followed her in.

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CHAPTER XVI.

Ye thocht that I was like yourself
And loving ilk ane I did see:
But here I swear by the Heaven's clear,
I never loved a man but thee.

All the ladies retired to their rooms on the return from the farm-house, for the frosty air had tired them, and below stairs the men made merry after their kind in the smoking-room, and thanked Heaven to be saved afternoon tea. Two of the women dismissed their maids quickly, and drank no tea that afternoon, and both, though from very different points of view, were eagerly reviewing the scenes enacted in the fencing-room overnight.

Let us yield the *pas* to the guest of the house, as she sits thinking, thinking, as never in all her frivolous life has she thought before. Like a panorama the last ten years of her life unrolled, and she saw herself, as maid, wife, and widow, preferring Dashwood to any other man she had ever met, but always conscious that, however she might attract him, she had no talisman by which to reach his heart. It was notorious that he had not loved his wife, and, if he amused himself, it was so negligently that he seemed to feel the trouble more than the pleasure of his ties, and she had never suspected the deeply rooted influence of any other woman in his life until she had heard Fitzhugh's story, told by Dashwood's neighbour. Then, at a

bound, she had leaped to the truth, and later, with a still bolder flight, made up her mind that Velasquez was Fitzhugh's son.

It was on these convictions that she had acted at the masked ball, and in her male disguise stolen hither and thither, whispering her doubts and suspicions, but it was only by seeing the curious effect her words had on both Dashwood and Velasquez, that she began to seriously suspect the former of having, by false means, brought about his friend's self-destruction. Later, as she was trying to regain her bedroom unperceived, she found herself entangled in dark corridors, from which she strove to escape, until she heard steps approaching, when she drew back, but to her terror they halted opposite her. The next moment she heard a grating, sliding sound, a step or two forward as through a door, and then the same sliding sound, and she knew herself alone.

But she had scarcely recovered, when a lighter footfall seemed to approach, and the flicker of a candle showed, and soon, looking neither to the right nor left, a tall figure in a white silk mask and domino paused at the same spot opposite the hider, and with one trembling hand shading the light so that it fell on a particular panel, pressed a thumb on it, and at the same moment the light went out, and a cold current of wind rushed to meet Mrs. Vivien as, without a moment's hesitation, she stepped noiselessly through the aperture close to Katharine, and into the thick darkness immediately beyond.

In the turmoil and excitement of her nerves, strained towards one point, Katharine heard and felt nothing; she swiftly closed the panel, and ran forward

to meet her lover, but met instead—Velasquez. Scarcely a word uttered in the room that night was lost on Mrs. Vivien; lying shrouded in her cloak against the wall she heard all, and, like another Jael, felt that another Sisera was given over into her hand when she found herself in possession of the scrap of paper that she felt certain held the clue to the real truth of the tragedy consummated in that room.

But the clue had been snatched from her before she had properly seized it. She shuddered even now at the thought of the cold hand that had touched hers, and which she took to be that of the dead man's . . . . but she wished now that it had been his, or that of any living man save Jack Stormonth. Here was a power by which he could compel Dashwood to give him Katharine, and was it likely the lover would fail to turn his knowledge to such profit? Then her chances were ruined. If the young fool had gone abroad, she might yet have made her game, but with him at home, perhaps in the immediate neighbourhood, she could not be safe for a moment. And without that scrap of paper she could prove nothing, and all her suppositions would be laughed to scorn by all reasonable people, while Dashwood would smile at, and defy her. Nevertheless—and here she set her teeth hard—she would play out her cards as gaily as if the most intrepid heart, certain of success, beat in her breast, and by the time the first dressing-bell rang she had settled her plan of action, and decided on the moment (not far distant) when she should commence the attack.

And naturally she had never been so fastidious before as to the shape of her gown, and the complexion of

her looks, so that her maid wondered if she had found fresh swains to conquer, and presently inquired in the servants' hall what new gentlemen were expected that night.

Meanwhile Katharine, too, was alone, divided between joy that Jack was not going away, and terror lest he should have supposed her to have made an assignation with Mr. Velasquez in the fencing-room before she received his letter.

For surely he had been angry with her, or why did he not come forward, even though a stranger was present? Why did he let her lift up her arms, even hold up her face (oh! how that poor face blushed at the thought), to Velasquez as her lover, when a few steps would have brought him to her side? He must have doubted her—doubted *her!* She wrung her hands at the thought. And he must have been inflexible in his anger, or why, when she stole there for the second time, did he not come to meet her? But bitterest, cruellest thought of all, she had been so near to the bliss of his voice, his touch, yet had missed both, and she could have sobbed for the loss of that hour of happiness, the sole one, perhaps, that she might have a chance of, before she came of age!

Then her tears turned to anger against Mr. Velasquez, that he must have known Jack was there, but held his peace both then, and during their conversation this morning. Perhaps he looked upon this affair as so purely clandestine that, from a sense of delicacy and regard for her feelings, he did not allude to it, and if her opinion of him was bad, pray what must *his* be of her?

Yet never had she carried her head higher than

when, full ten minutes before the dinner hour, she descended to the drawing-room, intent on having a few words alone with her father. It was his habit to enter the room some minutes before his guests, and his daughter found him there to-night, rather near the door, and bending over some portraits in enamel of the most famous beauties of his house. She approached him; as he looked up, she said, in a low, clear voice:

"Father, I have broken my promise to you, in the spirit if not in the letter of our agreement. I have met Jack Stormonth once, and should have met him a second time had he kept the appointment."

"Where did you meet him?" said Dashwood, turning sharply on his daughter.

"In the fencing-room."

He put his hand to his breast as if in momentary pain; then he said, in his usual cynical tones:

"Could you not have found a more agreeable *rendezvous?* And may I inquire the *dates* of these meetings?"

"The first was on the evening that your guests arrived; the second was to have been last night."

A shade of pallor crept around Dashwood's thin lips, but his voice was as usual when he said, "Since you are so explicit, may I ask during what hours Mr. Stormonth enjoyed the shelter of my roof last night?"

"I cannot tell you," said Katharine, with perfect calmness; "when I arrived, I found the rooms occupied to all appearances by Mr. Velasquez only. But I wish to say to you, that if I was hurried by excitement into meeting him the first time, nothing can excuse my willingness to do so on a second occasion,

and you need not bolt and bar the door of the fencing or any other room against me, for I will make or keep no other tryst with Mr. Stormonth until" (her voice sank to one of purest love) "my twenty-first birthday."

"Your assurances come too late," said Dashwood, in a low voice that seemed to freeze her, so full of menace, of hatred, of even despair, was it; but the next moment he had advanced to meet Mrs. Vivien, who looked even more lovely and listless than usual.

"Do I interrupt an interesting conversation?" she said, looking from one to the other, and acutely realizing what a mistake she had made in neglecting to take Katharine into her calculations.

"We were discussing a topic that threatens to become tiresome by repetition," said Dashwood; then, turning to Katharine, added, "Did you feel any angelic presence near you last night? Because, though invisible, Mrs. Vivien was in your company for a considerable time in the fencing-room."

Both women turned white as the dresses they wore, but Katharine's was the pallor of deep humiliation, while Mrs. Vivien's eyes were fixed on Dashwood with so curious a gaze that the girl felt as one suddenly thrust outside some drama in which, up to that moment, she had been taking no insignificant part, and she moved away, leaving her father and his guest face to face.

"So you defy me, Dashwood?" said Mrs. Vivien.

"My dear lady," he said, "why will you be so melodramatic, and make a tragedy out of a trifle? You hear a story, you get certain suspicions into your charming head, you put on a very uncomfortable dress

in order to *confide* those suspicions, then you lie for some hours in a very uncomfortable position in order to *verify* them; but you only surprise two lovers, both in love, though not necessarily with one another, and you overhear the soliloquy of an elderly gentleman, and connect it with a scrap of paper that, for whim's sake, he keeps in a battered Russian helmet. With the acquisitiveness of your lovely sex, you proceed to confiscate this bit of paper as soon as my back is turned——" he paused, then with an abrupt change of voice and countenance, added, "or did Stormonth take it?"

The question stabbed her like a sword-thrust unexpectedly delivered, and for a moment she staggered under it, then she said:

"Pray, who is Mr. Stormonth, and what should I know of his doings?"

But Dashwood had discovered all that he desired, or that he did not desire, to know.

Fury raged in his heart, as he smiled and left her, to welcome some new guests who had arrived from town that afternoon, and whom he now introduced to his daughter.

All the women, with two exceptions, were in high spirits that evening, and their complexions so fresh that another donkey ride might have been projected had not some signs of a thaw set in, rejoicing the men's hearts and holding up a lively prospect of scarlet coats and a run with the hounds very shortly.

It so happened that Mrs. Vivien and Mr. Velasquez were placed side by side, and the opportunity she had desired came.

"How do you like Mr. Stormonth?" she said as

coolly as if she had asked how he liked the change in the weather.

"He seems a very good fellow," said Mr. Velasquez, after a moment's pause; "no doubt you are acquainted with him in town?"

"Not I," said Mrs. Vivien; "my acquaintance with him is limited to an interview, very brief, in the fencing-room last night."

Velasquez started, and looked at her.

"Then you arrived there after I left?" he said, quietly.

"On the contrary, I arrived early, and, expecting nothing, found a vast deal to interest and—enlighten me."

"It was fortunate," said Velasquez, coldly, "that other persons—and matters—than yourself were discussed. You will pardon my reminding you of the old adage——"

"There is another," retorted Mrs. Vivien, "that I prefer. It runs thus: 'Two is company, three is trumpery.'"

"In this instance there would seem to be four, or perhaps six," said Mr. Velasquez, with perfect composure, "for to my knowledge you are the fifth person who was present last night."

"Who knows how many followed us?" said Mrs. Vivien, shrugging her shoulders; "but I have a word of advice for you. Don't give Katharine Dashwood up because there has been some boy and girl nonsense between her and Stormonth." Then she turned to the man next her, and left Velasquez to recover from the disagreeable shock of knowing that the profoundest secrets of his life were bared to the eyes of a

woman to whom the keeping of a secret was probably impossible.

Across the pure white flowers that decorated the table, he had more than once sought in vain to catch Katharine's glance, but she seemed engrossed with the new arrival from town, and had never showed so brilliantly, or in such good spirits, as to-night.

Long ago the men in the house had fitted her with the title of a "contemplative charmer," and by this they did not mean that she contemplated them, but herself. Now there is a story told of a gentleman of colour who was so enamoured of his own beauty that he spent his whole time gazing into a pool, until his mistress, burning with pity at her own neglected charms, broke his repose by rudely bouncing into his looking-glass, and so muddying its waters that his own image disappeared, and he was forced to the contemplation of hers.

No such interruption had apparently come to disturb our charmer in that quiet self-contemplation, or rather, self-communing, that made her move like one apart in the midst of the gaiety around her; even her constant companionship with Velasquez did not suggest, save to very superficial eyes, any serious interest in him, and one by one the men ceased to concern themselves about so cold and preoccupied a Diana.

But Katharine, bright, alive, with joy in her eyes to match the roses in her cheeks, with words of wit on her lips, and music in the happy voice whose laughter was frequently heard during dinner, was a creature so radiant and lovely that, as lesser lights pale when the fair queen of night rises on the horizon, so

did she outshine all others present, wherefore jealousy ruled the female, and admiration the male, bosoms, that surrounded Dashwood's table that night.

He alone appeared to notice no difference in his daughter, and was his usual self, neither gayer nor sadder than usual, and no one could have guessed the thoughts that came and went in his brain, or see the spectre that stood behind his chair, and whispered a single word over and over again into his ear.

In the drawing-room Katharine's manner changed, as if under a freezing influence. She did not pretend to understand these fine ladies, nor their shibboleth, nor their stories, nor the absence of their lords, but she had disapproved less of Mrs. Vivien than the rest, since *she* was a widow, and free to follow her own devices, even though they might be of no very elevated kind.

But to-night Katharine felt only indignation against a woman who could so easily play the part of an eavesdropper, and her eyes expressed a very sincere contempt as Mrs. Vivien presently approached, and took the vacant place beside her.

"Miss Dashwood," she said, "you are angry, and justly so. But it was with no thought of spying on you that I went to the fencing-room last night."

"Yet you remained to listen," said Katharine, coldly.

"Because retreat was next to impossible."

"Then I should have advanced," said Katharine, more coldly still, but longing wildly to ask Mrs. Vivien if she had seen Jack.

Mrs. Vivien shrugged her shoulders. "There are positions," she said, "where masterly inactivity is the

best policy, and this was one of them. But I was sorry," she went on, in a different and gentler tone, "that your father should have come and spoiled your tryst."

"Did Jack come after I left?" cried Katharine, the words springing irrepressibly from her lips.

"Is Mr. Velasquez' name Jack?" said Mrs. Vivien, opening her eyes.

"I meant Mr. Stormonth, the man to whom I am engaged," said Katharine, proudly.

"A-h!" said Mrs. Vivien, with a peculiar change of countenance.

"Do you know him?" said Katharine, feeling a little cold, she knew not why.

"No, but I hear of him very often. Is he not in the —th regiment?"

"Yes."

"About the fastest regiment in the line. And you are *engaged* to him?" added Mrs. Vivien, in a tone of incredulity.

"Is there any reason why I should not be?" said Katharine, haughtily.

"None that I know of," said Mrs. Vivien, adding in a half aside, "and Miss Dashwood is an heiress!"

"Have you been engaged long?" turning her blue eyes full of pity upon Katharine, who had scorned to notice her last words.

"I think that you need not concern yourself about that matter in the least, Mrs. Vivien."

"Really? But it may concern a friend of mine, the prettiest creature in a furiously *dark* style that I ever saw. And I believe she had good reasons for believing herself as good as engaged to Mr. Stor-

month a month ago. You see she lives at Farnbro'; and with men, absence does *not* make the heart grow fonder, and I think your father said you had been at school abroad for the last two years?"

But Katharine had moved away, and soon was the centre of a knot of men, not one of whom found it possible to leave her, for she had suddenly developed some airs of a coquette, however stately, and when the party presently sat down to "nap," she was the life and soul of the game.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Leave aff your pride, Margaret," he says,
"Use it not ony mair,
Or, when ye come where I hae been,
You will repent it sair."

THE frost had broken up with a will, and a hunt breakfast was going forward at Mallinger Towers.

The scene was one of indescribable bustle, movement, and colour; the rapid arrivals, the hearty greetings, mingling with the hum of talk among those already seated, the quickly moving servants, and the now dull, now brilliant, scarlet of the men's coats, lighting up the Lincoln green or the sober blue of the women's habits; the blackened oak serving as foil to the massive silver that flanked the sideboard, or shone in brighter shape among flowers upon the long table so richly spread with all that hungry men could desire, and over all a brilliant January sun streaming in through the broad window, of which the upper panes were of red, and gold, and purple.

Dashwood was in his place as host; apparently careless, but overlooking nothing and nobody, he fulfilled his duties with a grace and cordiality that made him appear more than ever distinct from the ordinary men who surrounded him, the only one present who touched, but did not surpass, him, being Mr. Velasquez.

More than one puzzled glance was turned on that

young man as he assisted Katharine at her tea equipage, and more than one country neighbour said to another, "What an extraordinary resemblance, by Jove!" but on hearing his name, concluded himself mistaken, and returned to the pleasures of the table. Each moment brought fresh arrivals, fresh greetings; the room at last was so crowded that it was a relief when the movement for a start was made, and all got to horse, and rode away.

The "meet" was held at about a mile's distance from the Towers, and as Katharine trotted between Mr. Velasquez and a neighbouring squire, she began to understand why Englishmen love fox-hunting, and how the typical fox-hunter, the object of cultured persons' disdain, is thoroughly happy, and with good reason. If his face is round, and his body is rounder, he has eyes and soul enough to rejoice in the dewy morning, the fresh smell of the earth, and the aromatic scent of the plants he treads underfoot; he sniffs up the air, now keen, now soft, as if it were Nature's physic, and he feels no care as he jogs along the lanes, perhaps to a hunt breakfast (though such a treat is rare), but always with the certainty that he will find pleasant company when he reaches his destination, while the hopes of good sport animate his honest breast. He meets his neighbours, there is some tedious waiting perhaps, beguiled by a pull from a flask, then at that most melodious cry of "Gone away!" he settles down in his saddle, lets his horse go, and *enjoys* himself more in the next twenty minutes (if the run is good) than did ever any pale student in most ardent pursuit of a discovery. Perhaps there is no "find" at all, only a tiresome

series of "baulks," and he goes home at the close of the short winter's day without having seen even the tip of Reynard's tail; but no matter! He has lived the day, he has breathed the air, and he is happy as he wends his way homeward to a good sound dinner followed by a sounder sleep, in which he dreams of better sport on the morrow.

"So you haven't forgotten how to ride, Miss Kitty?" said Squire Dalgety, regarding her with entire approbation.

"Didn't you teach me?" she said, turning so fresh a face upon her old friend as should have blinded him to the trouble in her eyes, but his own were keen, and he saw it, and perhaps was not sorry.

"Didn't I teach you both?" said the Squire, lowering his voice, although (for the lane was narrow) Velasquez had dropped behind.

"Who was the other?" said Kitty.

"Who else?" cried Squire Dalgety, growing warm; "who got you packed off to school when you were over seventeen years old, because he wanted to marry you, and you HIM; who has been waiting for you, like patience on a monument, these two years, and would wait a dozen more; who else, pray, but Jack Stormonth?"

"Oh, Jack!" said Kitty, slightingly.

"And pray, Miss Kitty," said the Squire, facing round, "what has he done to offend *you?*"

"Oh, *nothing!*" said Kitty, in the tone that implies "everything."

"Perhaps you've changed your mind," said Squire Dalgety, dryly, "and that handsome fellow riding behind us has something to do with it. He is con-

foundedly like the Fitzhughs, though, if he *is* one, it's precious bad taste his showing up in this neighbourhood."

"Hush!" said Kitty, for during the past few days, in which Mrs. Vivien had contrived to distil some more drops of venom into her mind, the girl had gone back to her first friendship for, and trust in, Velasquez, and tinctured too by a warmer sentiment, the sentiment of pity.

"Then if Jack's to be thrown overboard," said Squire Dalgety, nodding angrily, "I wish that, while he has been kicking his heels waiting for you, he had amused himself better. There are girls hereabouts that——"

"Perhaps he preferred to amuse himself in town," said Kitty, serenely; and then no more was said, for Velasquez joined them, and in a few minutes they had reached the scene of the "meet."

A scratch assemblage had gathered outside a village public-house situated on a gently rising ascent, whence at some distance branched off roads and lanes, and the usual riff-raff of the idle neighbourhood attended, watching with avid interest the huntsman with his hounds, and the people who, irrespective of the party from the Towers, constituted the "meet" that day.

These persons were, first, a farmer on a cob; secondly, a woman in honest petticoats and a jacket, on a stout pony; thirdly, a boy on a Shetland; and fourthly, a young man who sat his magnificent bay squarely, and with a sturdy look that signified it would take a good deal to move him from his present situation.

He was not in scarlet, and, in point of fact, his

father was very ill at that moment, but he saw in this no reason why he should not be present; for Kitty was *first*, and he would see *her*, and get a glint of her bright eyes, if nothing more; so there he sat sturdily, and cared for nobody—but Kitty.

Yet when the van of the bright cavalcade from the Towers, numbering in all about two hundred, had come up quickly, and gradually scattered hither and thither, but left a clear space to the humble followers of the chase before mentioned, though many a greeting was sung out to Jack Stormonth, he replied but by a nod, or a touch of his whip to his hat, for he was watching for Katharine, who, when she came, Velasquez at her side, did not see him.

Did she see him? Is love so blind as we think? Does he not make us hear when we cannot see, and feel when we cannot hear?

Jack sat immovable, hardly knowing if he were most angry or most hurt. She seemed so really unconscious of his presence that he could not ascribe her absorption in Velasquez to coquetry, and as the minute or two of waiting before the start passed, he felt the more convinced that she had not seen him, but resolved to *make* her look at him before the day was done.

He had not meant to follow the hounds, but only to see her; to exchange one long look, and ride away; but now he had changed his mind, and fell in with the rest when the huntsman galloped forward, leading the way to Dingley woods.

"Why, man!" cried a cheery voice near him, "are you going to your own funeral?" and Jack turned to find Squire Dalgety's face at his elbow.

"Not I," said Jack, laughing; "but I dare say I shall get a spill. I always do, you know."

"How is your father?"

"Better, but still very ill."

"Humph!" grunted Squire Dalgety, "then why are you here?"

"I came to see a young lady," said Jack, audaciously.

"And the young lady won't see you," said the Squire, with another grunt of dissatisfaction; "what have you been up to in town, young man?"

"Oh, nothing, sir, nothing!"

There was a slight flush on Jack's cheek, that seemed to belie his words, and the Squire shook his head.

"Dashwood's a fool," he said, "to keep you so long apart; but I should have thought almost any man might have kept straight for the sake of a Kitty Dashwood. And I can't make that fellow out," he added, nodding at Velasquez, who, with Katharine, was far ahead; "he calls himself by a foreign name, and *looks* every inch a Fitzhugh. Yet Dashwood receives him, and lets the young people be together to their hearts' content. Is he afraid of the fellow?" added the Squire, turning sharply, and fixing suspicious eyes on Jack.

The young man hesitated. He could not betray his cousin, whose secret was his own, but he did feel that he hated him very heartily as he looked at the two dwindling backs before him, and the demon of jealousy was gnawing at his heart each moment with sharper fangs.

"I don't think Mr. Dashwood is in the habit of

being afraid of anybody," he said, "and I think you are judging Kitty—Miss Dashwood—without a hearing."

"Humph!" said the Squire again, "I am not so sure about that. I rode up with her, and she dropped a word or two, and I gave her a hearing of course, and unsatisfactory enough it was."

"She was faithful enough to me less than a week ago," said Jack, stoutly, then checked himself, and by the friskings of his horse contrived to put a space between himself and the Squire that rendered further conversation impossible. In the halt outside the woods he found himself so close to Katharine that he could hear her voice, and admire, as he willed, the exquisite shape in its grey habit, the lovely face beneath the grey hat, and the skill with which she managed the fiery black horse that not another woman present could have ridden. But in point of fact he did not admire her at all just then. "If she be not fair for me, what care I how fair she be?" and he longed to give her a good shaking, and a large piece of his mind.

A good many women present had been wondering who was this handsome, determined-looking young man who seemed to know so many people, yet had not been included in the invitations to the hunt breakfast at the Towers. More than one roving glance of admiration played on him, and perhaps he was not quite unconscious of the unwonted loveliness around him, but for the present, at least, he would leave the honours of jilting with the faithless Kitty, and take his own revenge by-and-by.

A woman who did not cast eyes at him, or, indeed, seem to be aware of his presence, was Mrs. Vivien;

yet by imperceptible degrees she contrived to get so near to him that she was only a few yards behind when the deep baying of the hounds proclaimed a "find," and without ceremony the field pushed forward to follow.

But whoever followed Jack Stormouth that day must have ridden far and fast, though not fast enough to overtake a certain grey habit that fluttered almost recklessly in the very van of the field, and later came in at the death, of one of the best runs of the season.

Stormouth might have been present but that, after leaping a brook, a female voice in accents of distress pursued him, and he turned back to find Mrs. Vivien seated on the ground, nursing her ankle, while from the other side of the water her steed gazed at her as if deploring the accident that had taken her over, but left himself behind.

"That brute has thrown me," said the lady, with a very good imitation of tears in her eyes, "and I believe my ankle is twisted or broken, and how am I to get home?"

"Ah!" said Jack, "I remember you."

"It would be more to the point, sir," she said tartly, "if you were to assist me."

He groaned inwardly as he turned and saw the last straggler of the hunt disappearing; in a few moments his chance would be over of seeing Kitty again that day, and he did not believe this woman was hurt in the least.

"If you will let me put you on my horse, I will lead him round to where you can mount your own," said Jack, adding rather heartlessly, "and then no doubt you will be able to follow with the rest."

"Brute!" said Mrs. Vivien, with a flash of the eye that should have slain him, but he only picked her up as if she were a child, set her in the saddle, and, putting his arm through the reins, brought her by a somewhat roundabout way to the spot where her steed should have been, but was not.

"Confound *it*!" said Jack under his breath heartily, and Mrs. Vivien turned her head aside to avoid a smile. At the distance of a couple of fields her smart nag was making a bee line for the Towers, having evidently hunted to his stomach's content.

"What is to be done?" said Mrs. Vivien, turning a concerned face on the young man: "I have spoiled your day, and I have got your horse, and how are you to walk all that way back on foot?"

Jack's good-humour was returning. To be sure, his chance of seeing Kitty was gone, but, on the other hand, he had ardently wished for the opportunity of meeting Mrs. Vivien again, and now he had got it.

"I can manage the walking," he said, "if you can manage the saddle." Then, in stooping to shorten the left stirrup, he discovered that the lady had as remarkably pretty a foot as he had already discovered her to be a remarkably lovely woman.

"What is her game?" he thought as he gave her the reins, and walked beside her on the thick wet grass, while she looked at him over her shoulder, and wondered if he had about his person that precious bit of paper which she coveted above everything in the world.

"Do you know that you are in my debt?" she said to him suddenly.

"Only for the honour of your company," said Jack, "on this and a former occasion."

"And on the former occasion," said Mrs. Vivien, "you *snatched* (and it's not a pretty word, but it exactly expresses the truth) a paper from me, and I ask you as a gentleman, to give me that paper back."

"Unfortunately," said Jack, dryly, "I was auditor, if not actual witness, to the theft of that paper from a place where Mr. Dashwood had a few minutes before placed it for safety. I therefore consider it my duty to restore it to *him* as the real owner."

She could have struck him with her gauntleted hand as he walked beside her; if he had turned, he must have seen the passion that deformed her face, but he was looking straight before him, and her voice was natural when she said:

"You know the *contents* of the paper, of course?"

"Do you?" he said, turning his head to look at her.

"Mallinger Dashwood and I have few secrets from each other," she said calmly, "but this I can tell you, that your giving him back that paper will make you impossible to him as a son-in-law."

"And why?" exclaimed Jack, startled.

"Is he a man to be forced to anything at the sword's point? Let alone, he may relent long before his daughter is of age, but show him that you think you have him in your power, and he will allow her to drift into a marriage with Mr. Velasquez."

"Impossible!" cried Jack; "there are reasons——" he checked himself, then said: "and you appear to be reckoning without Miss Dashwood's consent."

He was looking hard at Mrs. Vivien now, and he caught the flutter of the eyelids, the faint drooping of

the lips, and other intangible signs by which a woman expresses so much more than she dares to say.

"You mean that her consent would be forthcoming?" said poor Jack, hoarsely, and stopping short in the midst of the ploughed field into which he had plunged.

"He is very good-looking," said Mrs. Vivien, thoughtfully, "and very fascinating, and he is always beside her, and you are always away."

Jack laughed, and tossed his head high in the air.

"You don't know Kitty," he said. "Nobody does as well as I do."

"So you won't give me that bit of paper?" said Mrs. Vivien, as they reached the road, and a clatter of approaching hoofs threatened to disturb their *tête-à-tête.*

"No! I'll keep it for the present."

A moment later and Mallinger Dashwood came into view, splashed and miry, as one who had ridden in hot haste.

"My dear lady," he cried, at sight of her, and without noticing Stormonth, "what has happened? I missed you and rode back at once; but I see you have been taken good care of," and he bowed to Jack as a stranger, then recognition seemed to quicken in his eyes, and he said, "Mr. Stormonth?"

Jack nodded, and, raising his hat to Mrs. Vivien, walked away.

The situation had a touch of the grotesque in it, and Mrs. Vivien laughed.

"You had met before?" said Dashwood, arguing quite wrongly from her mirth, and with a curious sense of relief.

"Why not?" she said, preserving her gay *nonchalant* bearing, "and of course I am interested in him as your daughter's suitor."

"An unacceptable one," said Dashwood, carelessly.

"You prefer Mr. Fitz—I mean Mr. Velasquez?"

"I prefer neither. Shall we turn homeward now? You cannot be very comfortable in that saddle."

"It is as comfortable as an arm-chair." She leaned over, and patted the glossy neck of the magnificent horse, that, while all fire with his master, now carried her with the gentleness of a lamb.

"Dear Dashwood," she said, "why should not your daughter and Mr. Stormonth marry? She will never love any other man. She is like her father—faithful."

"A bad complaint," he said, as he opened a gate with his whip for her to pass through.

"But it is worse for the woman than the man," said Mrs. Vivien, bitterly, when he had joined her. "Perhaps her faithfulness is the one thing in her life, and to a man it is only one of many, and recurring only by fits and starts."

"You should not quarrel with a man's idea of it," he said; "you, who have had so much—and not by fits and starts. There is poor Noll——"

"Oh! Noll!" she said. "He is a spaniel—with a spaniel's attributes."

"Yet as you value faithfulness so much," said Dashwood, dryly, "you should value him."

"I do not want it," she cried passionately; "I want love—love, *your* love, Dashwood, and you will not give it me!"

"You are my dearest friend," he said, lifting her hand to his lips. "I am too old for love now."

"No, no," she cried, and drew his palm upwards until it touched her cheek, down which the tears were falling. "You loved me once—I could make you love me again . . . . and you would forget your Tita . . . ."

He knew that she was not acting now; that, however she might have schemed, and used *finesse* to get him in her power, it had been solely because she loved him, not that she might work him harm. And yet a woman scorned is a dangerous thing, and he must dispossess her of all such power, no matter how, for in his opinion the end justified the means.

"Alice," he said, and her heart leaped (it was five years now since he had called her by that name), "if you still honour me with your affection, you have lately taken a strange way of showing it."

The grave voice, so unlike his usual satirical polished tones, the kindled glance of the habitually cold eyes, moved her more powerfully than a declaration of love from his lips could have done; she bent her head lower over his hand, and her tears fell on it like rain.

She had not taken into consideration the frightful disadvantage under which a woman labours when she sits down to play a game at skill with the man whom she passionately loves; yet even while she laid her weapons down, she felt a trembling happiness to which her worldly heart had never before been sensible.

"I will tell you the truth," she said almost below her breath, as the horses went at a foot-pace along the uneven lane, with the ragged hedges, upon which

patches of snow still lingered, shutting them in. "I was struck by something in your face when you met Mr. Velasquez, and by something in his manner when the story of the fencing-room was told in the drawing-room one evening. You had been cold to me, colder than usual, and I longed to make you feel my power, and at the masked ball I hazarded wild guesses, trying to produce an effect upon you, but it was by accident more than intent that I got into the fencing-room that night."

She paused, and Dashwood's right hand closed on his whip and reins like a vice.

"I heard it all," she said at last, and looking away from him, "all that Mr. Velasquez said to Mr. Stormonth, and how he was sure, and how his mother was sure, that something had passed between you and Mr. Fitzhugh in the fencing-room—something besides the letter that came to you from the bank."

She paused again, not daring to look at the man upon whose honour no speck or stain had ever rested, and did not resist when he drew his hand out of hers, and let it fall to his side.

Perhaps she knew that the bitterness of death was in his heart, but thought that the fount of love in her own might quench it, for love is mighty, and barely sees the obstacles that it hews out of its path. Yet she trembled as she said:

"And so I stole the scrap of paper out of the helmet, after you went away."

She dared to look at him now, and found that his eyes were searching every line of her face, then he said:

"And what did you find in it?"

"Something that Tita did *not* write," said Mrs. Vivien, boldly.

The shot told; for a moment a film seemed stretched before the eagle eyes turned upon her, then something in her face, a shrinking, a tremor, fixed his attention, and he knew that she was deceiving him.

"You will repeat to me the exact words of that letter?" he said, gently.

"No," she said, sullenly, "I will not."

For a moment or two he watched the averted profile, then he accepted his fate. He knew now that his honour was no longer in the hands of a woman who loved him, but probably in those of an enemy who was not likely to spare him.

"Poor Alice!" he said, and smiled.

Then she knew herself detected, and burst into a passion of tears.

"Oh! Dashwood," she said, between her sobs, "how can I get it back? That wretch stole it from me."

"Velasquez?"

"No, it was——"

"Don't tell me," said Dashwood, interrupting her; "but I think you are mistaken about the contents of that paper. You have not read it, and I have."

She did not reply—they were now entering the village that led to the Towers, and she had dried her eyes, straightened herself, and was as fine and indifferent a lady as ever, before they had gone twenty paces farther, and if the spectacle of a woman on a man's saddle was unusual, why, she supported the situation with unusual grace.

But when an hour later Jack Stormonth's horse

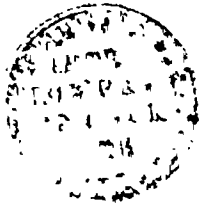
was sent back to the Hall, there went with him a letter from Mallinger Dashwood that ran as follows:—

"DEAR MR. STORMONTH,—

"My guest, Mrs. Vivien, would like to thank you more fully for your kindness in taking care of her to-day; and my daughter and I will be happy to see you at dinner to-morrow at eight o'clock, if you will honour us with your company.

"Believe me your faithful servant,

"MALLINGER DASHWOOD."



CHAPTER XVIII.

And fair Margaret, and rare Margaret,
And Margaret o' veritie
Gin e'er ye love another man,
Ne'er love him as ye did me.

MARY MARTIN sat knitting in her ingle-nook, the work of the day being done, and the labourers abroad, when the tap of a riding-whip was heard on the door, and Jack Stourmonth came in.

He looked weary and dispirited, and was splashed with mire, as if he had walked far, and the good woman rose in anxiety to meet him.

"Is the Squire worse, sir?" she said, when she had brought a jug of ale and served him.

"No—but Kitty—Kitty" (he spoke with intense bitterness) "is as bad as bad can be."

"She is *ill*, Master Jack?" cried Mary, turning very pale.

"Oh! yes—as ill as she can be—in her temper, and her manners, and her morals; in fact, I don't believe there's one sound virtuous bit of your Miss Kitty left."

"There's plenty, sir," said Mary, wrathfully, "and I won't hear my young lady abused like that. And pray what has she done now?"

"Only thrown me over for Mr. Velasquez," said Jack, savagely.

"You mean Mr. Fitzhugh?" said Mary.

Jack turned a startled gaze on his old friend, and exclaimed:

"How do you know *that?*"

"You can't rub out Nature's handwriting," said Mary, showing curious agitation, "and I saw his father's face too often at the Towers not to know *this* one."

"Mary," said Jack, abruptly, "you know how Miss Kitty and I loved each other as children long before we understood the feud between our families, for Mr. Dashwood was abroad then, and you had not the heart to keep us apart; but when he came back, he separated us, but could not hinder our meeting years later, when we loved, and parted, but vowed to keep true to one another."

"And she is true now, Master Jack," said Mary stoutly, but with an anxious look at the handsome young man who seemed to have grown haggard in a day.

"And I say that she is not," he replied, stubbornly, "it is not from what I have *heard* to-day, but from her own *acts* that I judge her. Would you believe it, Mary, that she could *cut* me before the whole field?"

"Perhaps her father was by, and she daren't notice you."

"Did her father's presence compel her to flirt—Oh! Heavens! to think that she can flirt!—with another man under my very nose!"

"All love," said Mary, nodding.

"Then I'd rather have her hate," said Jack, getting up and striding about, "it's all very well for men to flirt, but I'll be hanged if I will let my wife do it."

"She won't want to," said Mary, briskly, "and as

to her being kind to the poor young man, how do you know that it isn't just *pity* and no more?"

"Why should she pity him?" said Jack shortly, as he came to a full stop. "He has every attribute of success. He has influence through a great man whose wife has taken him up; he has good looks enough to bring any woman to his feet—even my Kitty;" he added bitterly: "he can marry as high as he pleases, and what more does he want?"

"Only his father's good name, so that he can wear his own," said Mary.

"And how can he get that?" cried Jack, impatiently, "he has no facts to go upon—it is all pure guess-work—all except——" His hand involuntarily touched his breast pocket, and he recommenced his stride.

Mary had laid down her knitting, and her comely face was working strangely.

"Master Jack," she said, "don't set yourself against him, he is your own cousin; and I befear me, his father was most grievously wronged."

"You mean that his death was brought about by foul means?" said Jack, facing round.

Mary made no answer, but went on knitting, though her hands trembled.

Jack looked at her awhile, then went to her, and took knitting and hands into his strong grasp. "What do you know, Mary?" he said. "Though I may hate him—and I *do*—I would not keep back a scrap of evidence that could clear his father's name. And you'll tell me everything."

Mary looked up at the resolute young face, her mind struggling against him yet.

"It's so long ago," she said, "nigh upon nineteen and a half years—and I haven't held my peace so long to break it now."

Jack let go her hands, fetched a chair, and sat down beside her.

"Now, Mary," he said, "begin."

"I can't," she said in a whisper, "there's those living now, that would blame me for keeping silence then—and Mr. Dashwood he'd turn my master and me out of the farm as soon as look."

"There is more than one farm on my father's estate that you shall have when you want it," said Jack, impatiently, "though I don't know that what you tell me will go any farther, for we want *facts*, not suppositions."

Mary sate silent, winding and unwinding her ball of wool.

"Why do you want to know?" she said at last; "if you clear his father, you give him a better chance with Miss Kitty—though I don't believe he ever had any."

"You have got to tell me, Mary, and you know it," said Jack, "so the sooner you begin the better."

Mary looked half-fearfully around. The day was closing in, the blaze from the hearth made the outlook from the windows almost dark, and a curious sense of silence reigned in the place.

"I was first maid to Lady Alicia, after Mr. Dashwood brought her home from the foreign tour they had taken on their marriage. She sent her Frenchwoman away, and hired me instead, and I was quite happy in her service. She was young, gay, beautiful, and she loved her husband to her heart's content, if

not to his. She saw no lack in him, and I never suspected any, till one day when I saw him in the company of Mrs. Fitzhugh. I had never seen her before, though her husband was constantly at the Towers, but I had to attend my mistress to an archery meeting, and on following her with a wrap, I lost sight of her, and found myself in a tent where two people were standing, my master and Mrs. Fitzhugh. She was so beautiful that she took my breath away—and only afterwards I seemed to recollect what he was saying. 'Tita,' he said, 'can't we be friends?'

"'No,' she said, and on the moment my mistress came in, looking faint and ill, supported by Mr. Fitzhugh, and I saw Mrs. Fitzhugh look at her hard, then she went forward quickly, and caught her in her arms. It was a long swoon—and I managed to get both the men away. But when it was over, and she had come to life again, the two ladies were friends. One was ignorant, and one *knew*—and Mrs. Fitzhugh had the lead, and kept it. She would have my mistress go to her house, though she would never set foot in my master's, and I used to think Mrs. Dashwood showed little pride in going to a place where her husband was not received, and I never could think what excuse her friend made to her for not receiving him. It was an odd thing to see Mr. Fitzhugh constantly at the Towers, my mistress constantly away with Mrs. Fitzhugh, it seemed as if the two ladies were just as fond of each other's company as the two gentlemen were of one another's, and if people talked and gossipped a bit at the queer terms the families were on, not one of these four seemed to care. And so things went on for close upon a year, and when my mistress was not able

to go out so much, though she begged and prayed Mrs. Fitzhugh to come to the Towers, she could never persuade her—but after all Mrs. Fitzhugh did set foot in the place—once."

Mary paused, and looked anxiously at the door, as if she expected it to open, and admit some one of whom she was afraid.

"And now, Master Jack, I'm going to tell you something queer—and perhaps you'll piece it together with what followed afterwards—but perhaps you'll piece it differently to how I did. About a week before her confinement, she called me to her one day as I sate with my sewing in an outer room, and said, 'Look, Martin! did you ever see any one as clever as I am at imitating handwriting?' and she held up an envelope, with the ink wet, addressed to Mrs. Fitzhugh, that I could have sworn was in my master's hand. I said, 'Indeed, my lady, no one would have it for yours,' and she laughed, and said, 'I can sign cheques too, and write Mr. Dashwood's name at the end, so that even *he* can't tell it from his own signature!' I felt uneasy when she said this, and exclaimed, 'Oh! my lady, that is forgery!' but she only laughed again, and said, 'Why you stupid, Mary, your master saw me do it, and of course he tore the cheques up—' and she pointed at some pieces of pink paper, torn very small that lay in the waste-paper basket. I thought no more about it, until certain things happened that forced me to recollect it. . . . . About a week after, as I said, the baby Miss Katharine was born, and the mother did well for a few days, then she had some feverish signs, and it was on the day that she began to be really ill, that the dreadful thing happened in

the fencing-room—but I haven't come to that yet. Mr. Dashwood had not been up to see her since eleven o'clock, and between one and two she sent me for him, and I went downstairs, and to the library, where the butler said I should find him.

"I knocked gently, and thought he said, 'come in,' but he did not look up as I entered, and as I saw he was busy at his writing-table, I stood still in the background waiting for him to speak. In the smoking-room beyond, I could see the back of Mr. Fitzhugh's head above his easy-chair, and I thought from his attitude that he was asleep.

"My master was sitting sideways to me, and I could plainly see what he was doing—opening carefully, so as not to tear or deface it, a closed letter. He used a thin ivory paper-knife for the purpose, and when it was quite open, he took out a letter that contained a pink slip of paper, laid it on the table, and took from beneath the blotting-pad another and similar pink slip, this he put inside the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and fastened it down. The cheque he had removed he placed in his pocket-book. Then he rose and moved towards the bell, and at the same moment discovered me. I thought he started, then he asked my errand, and said he would be upstairs directly, and I heard the bell ring as I went out. He came up almost immediately, but did not remain long, and having sent for the doctor, and reassured her, he went down again, and presently I saw him walking with Mr. Fitzhugh in the grounds.

"Mary," said Jack, sternly, "why did you not tell all this at the inquest?"

"I wasn't called as a witness," she said, trembling, "besides I hadn't put it all together in my mind then, it was only bit by bit I did that—after. But you'll blame me more when you hear the rest." She paused as one who has not courage to continue, and her comely face had become very pale when she said:

"Early in the afternoon, Lady Alicia got worse, and sent me again for my master. Her love for him was so great, that she would always have kept him in her sight if it were possible. I felt pretty sure of finding them in the fencing-room at their rapier play, so did not go down to inquire, but went straight there, and seeing the panel a few inches open, I went close to it, meaning to knock at it, and call my master. I could see in quite plainly, the gentlemen had just stripped to their shirt-sleeves, and Mr. Dashwood was at that moment stooping to pick up a lady's handkerchief of white silk with a large scarlet monogram in the corner. It was not one of my mistress's, I had never seen it before. I noticed that he picked it up awkwardly, and thrust it at once inside the bosom of his shirt as he rose, and I thought Mr. Fitzhugh looked at him strangely as their play began. I can't say what it was that kept me standing there, staring without speaking, but I was just fascinated by the two, they made such a splendid pair, and they played so magnificently—I'd seen them at it before many a time when I was in attendance on my lady, but I never saw them show such skill and fire as they showed that day. Suddenly Mr. Fitzhugh stopped, and said in a very odd voice, 'You will lend me your handkerchief?' My master gave him his own. 'No, the

other,' said Mr. Fitzhugh, he spoke in a tone that might have roused any man's blood.

"'One does not part with a *gage d'amour*,' said my master insolently, and he smiled.

"'You stole it from my wife's waiting-maid,' said Mr. Fitzhugh, who had gone pale as death.

"'No,' said Mr. Dashwood, 'I never steal from waiting-maids what their mistresses give.'

"'On guard!' cried Mr. Fitzhugh, and rushed at him, and as they thrust fiercely at each other, I had some wild thought of running in between them, but just then I heard the butler's step approaching, and in a panic of fear I got away out of sight, and went back to poor Lady Alicia. I made some excuse, and then sat down like the coward that I was, shaking in every limb, and listening with all my soul for I did not know what—but I had not to wait long. Within a quarter of an hour my master came into the room, kissed Lady Alicia, and spoke soothingly to her, but though she did not see anything amiss, I knew by one look at his face that Mr. Fitzhugh was dead. He went away presently, and the doctor came, he looked as if he had got a shock, and at me as if he wanted to know what had happened, but I gave no sign then or at any other time, of knowing anything more than what I was told. My mistress grew much worse, and I never left her—somehow I had a horror of crossing the threshold, and a still greater horror of seeing my master cross it again. The nurse was in the next room with the baby. She had always disliked me because I was not a gossip like herself. Late in the afternoon I heard a very quiet knock at the door, and I found the butler standing outside. He looked pale and ill, and his hand trembled as he

beckoned me out, and then he told me that Mr. Fitzhugh had committed suicide in the fencing-room a few hours ago. He said that he had gone there with a letter, and had found the gentlemen fencing very fiercely, and suspected mischief, but they paused when he appeared, and he saw his master walk to a little distance to read the letter, and he came away. He had hardly got to the end of the corridor when he heard himself suddenly and violently called back, and he rushed into the fencing-room just in time to see Mr. Fitzhugh falling to the ground, his right hand grasping the rapier that he had driven through his breast."

"But the butler on giving his evidence said there was something white—a letter, he thought, pinned by the rapier to his breast," cried Jack in great excitement.

"And so there was," said Mary in a very low voice, "but it was gone when the butler came back with help. The banker's letter about the forgery was by his side. Nobody seemed to think much of it at the inquiry held on the death, and the butler contradicted himself, and said at last he would not swear to having seen it—he was so flustered he might have been mistaken. But, Master Jack," and Mary laid her hand on the young man's arm, "if we could see that letter, we should find in it the real truth about Mr. Fitzhugh's death."

"I have it here," said Jack, and he took out a pocket-book, and produced from it a discoloured scrap of paper, "here is the last link that completes the chain of evidence against—Kitty's father."

Mary had fallen back breathless with astonishment at sight of the paper, but the shame and bitterness of his voice moved her powerfully, and she said :

"There's no dishonour 'll rest upon *her*—and who's to know it except our two selves? I guess *he's* been punished enough, carrying about a hell in his heart all these years."

"But don't you see, Mary," said Jack, impatiently, "that with all this evidence in our hands, it would be most dishonourable both to the dead father, and the living son, not to clear their name from the stain that rests on it?"

"Oh! Master Jack!" cried Mary in horror, "you're not going to try and make me tell to other folks what I've told you here to-night?"

"I think so," he said, and his handsome face looked very stern and pale as he turned it on her; "you shirked your duty nearly twenty years ago, Mary, but you will have to do it now."

"My duty!" cried Mary, angrily, "my duty was to my mistress first—the least hint of it might have killed her then."

"But she died soon after—why did you not do your duty then?"

"There was the child," said Mary, "why should I try and foul her name and her father's, when most likely 'twould only end in my muddying myself? Who would have believed me? And Mr. Fitzhugh *did* kill himself—master had no hand in that—and the man was a fool and a coward to go out of the world in a fit of jealous madness."

"The truth shall be told—it *must* be told," said Jack doggedly, "it will be for Mr. Velasquez to decide whether he will publish it or not."

"And my man will never forgive me," said Mary, with bitter tears in her eyes, "and we shall be turned out of here—and there's my pretty Molly——"

"Did you ever tell Martin all this?" said Jack sharply.

"Not I—not a word of it has ever crossed my lips till to-night."

"He would be the first to bid you speak," said the young man, as he took out his pocket-book to replace the paper.

"Let me see it, Master Jack," she cried, eagerly. "I've guessed such many times what could have been in it——"

"No, Mary," said Jack, "I won't trust it in your hands—but I'll tell you its contents. It is a love-letter from Mrs. Fitzhugh to Mr. Dashwood, but unless she was the most deceitful woman on earth, I should say this letter was forged."

"*She* write a love-letter to *him!*" cried Mary; "why she came to the place where her husband's dead body lay, and cursed Mr. Dashwood, and swore he was a murderer, and she would never rest till she'd brought him to justice! The butler said it made his blood run cold to hear her, and then she fell down in a fit on Mr. Fitzhugh's body, and so the living and the dead were carried back to their home together."

"It was a foul cowardly *murder,*" said Jack between his teeth, "and to think that such a man should be father of my good, sweet—no, not *true* Kitty," he added as one stabbed by a sudden recollection, "and no doubt *now,* rather than have his disgrace published, he will give her to that fellow—and every one will be satisfied—except me."

Mary had long ago ceased to knit, the flame from the hearth showed her face to be very pale, and she started violently as at that moment a knock was heard, and the next moment a dark figure gloomed in the doorway—it was Mr. Velasquez.

CHAPTER XIX.

Had I but had the wit yestreen
That I hae coft this day,
I'd paid my kane seven times to hell,
Ere you'd been won away!

Mr. Velasquez advanced immediately, and the cheerful blaze of the hearth showed that in one hand he carried a bit of white that looked like a letter. He bowed gravely to Jack, who did not rise, but bowed with equal ceremony in return, then he turned to Mrs. Martin, who was standing, and gave her the small twisted-up note, saying, "Miss Dashwood asked me to deliver this to you."

Mary curtsied and went nearer the fire to read it, but her hands trembled so violently that she only fumbled with, but did not open it. The two men looked at one another, then Jack spoke:

"You could not have come at a more opportune time," he said. "Mrs. Martin and I were just talking about you."

Mr. Velasquez looked towards the farmer's wife with some haughtiness.

"I am not aware that my affairs can in any way nterest—Mrs. Martin."

"On the contrary," said Jack, carelessly, "I don't know any one who could tell you so much about them. Mary," he added, "come here."

Mary came sullenly, and stood before the two men with the note half untwisted in her hands.

"Tell Mr. Velasquez all you have told me."

"I won't," said Mary, sitting down with a stubborn look on her face as Jack rose.

"Then I will take the telling of the story on myself," said Jack, "and if I make any mistakes, you'll correct me."

He turned to Mr. Velasquez, whose features were quite calm, but his eyes extraordinarily bright.

"Mrs. Martin, sir, was maid to Lady Alicia Dashwood some twenty years ago, and became acquainted with the fact that her mistress could copy her husband's writing so exactly, that she even signed some cheques one day with his signature and his knowledge, and triumphantly told her maid of it afterwards. She pointed to the torn pieces in the waste-paper basket, but judging by subsequent events one of these cheques was—saved. On the day of the tragedy in the fencing-room, Mrs. Martin had occasion to go to the library, and, herself unobserved, saw Mr. Dashwood unfasten a letter in such a way as to leave no signs of its having been opened, take out a cheque, replace it with another, then refasten it, and rise as if to despatch it. Your father, Mr. Fitzhugh, was at the time asleep in the next room. It is clear now that Mr. Fitzhugh in writing to his wife had enclosed the cheque actually given by Mr. Dashwood in payment for the bit of land for which they had been bargaining, and that Mr. Dashwood had substituted for it one of the blank cheques signed by his wife, that he had filled in the date and amount, forged Fitzhugh's endorsement at the back, then sent it by a mounted messenger to Mrs. Fitzhugh. Later in the day Mrs. Martin was

again sent in search of her master, and found him with Mr. Fitzhugh in the fencing-room. Mr. Dashwood was in the act of stooping to pick up a lady's handkerchief, in the corner of which was a large monogram in blue——"

"In scarlet," said Mary, curtly.

"Then tell that part of the story," he said, turning on her sharply; and startled out of herself, and perhaps seeing that she had gone too far to retreat, Mary told it—so far as what she saw and heard in the fencing-room was concerned.

"Mr. Stormonth can tell you the rest," she said, in a voice of mingled anger and fear as she concluded, "*he* knows what's inside that bit of paper—and I don't."

Jack explained, then produced the scrap of paper, and handed it to Mr. Velasquez. He saw how the hand of his enemy shook as it held the paper, saw that the gaze of the dark eyes fixed upon it beheld nothing, and mechanically stretched out his hand for it, meaning to read it aloud.

"*No!*" shouted Velasquez, and put his arm behind his back.

"Why, damn you, sir," cried Jack with flashing eyes, "what more do you want to steal? A dishonourable fellow who comes on false pretences to a house, and tries to seduce from him another man's sweetheart, because he knows the man she loves is forbidden the place——"

"If she loves him, there is no danger," interrupted Mr. Velasquez, drily.

"Why, he is sneak enough for anything!" concluded Jack, "and for my part I should love to *kick* him!"

"Pray try," said Mr. Velasquez, grimly.

"Sir, sir," cried Mrs. Martin, her own small passions forgotten in fear of a conflict of the two men, "do you know it's all Mr. Stormouth's doing, and by his forcing me to speak out on your behalf, that you've heard any bit of the truth this day?"

"Hold your tongue, Mary," said Jack, roughly, "he shall have every chance given him—*I*, for one, won't step in to hinder him."

And he dashed his hat on his head, and had crossed the kitchen, and was out at the door before Mary had time to draw breath.

Mr. Velasquez's eyes followed him, though he did not stir. Since last he saw Jack his feelings and ideas had undergone a thorough change. He was not prepared to give up Kitty now—and Kitty's own behaviour was the cause.

He drew his pocket-book from his breast, and slowly, with his eyes on Mary, placed the precious scrap of paper inside it.

"Is there any answer to your young lady's letter?" he said.

"No," she answered, and that was true enough, for she had not read it.

Then he went away, and she knew that he knew her for his enemy.

CHAPTER XX.

Nae wonder, nae wonder, Gil Morrice,
My lady lo'es thee weel;
For the whitest part o' my body
Is blacker than thy heel.

"My dear," whispered Mrs. Vivien in Katharine's ear just before dinner that night, "your Jack Stormonth is the most charming love-maker that I ever met—no wonder you and poor Nina, with hosts of others, succumbed to him!"

"Did you?" said Katharine, too proud to inquire, yet having already coupled the simultaneous disappearance of the lady and Jack from the hunt.

"Of course he came to see *you*," said Mrs. Vivien, shrugging her shoulders, "but when he found you so taken up with Mr. Velasquez, he speedily consoled himself."

"He is more than welcome," said Katharine, coldly.

"But still, my dear, I really believe that in his heart he prefers you to Nina, or to any of the rest of us who help him to while away an idle hour!"

"I am honoured by his supposed preference," said Katharine, smiling, as she moved away, followed by a dark look from the blue eyes that had shed such bitter tears of love and disappointment that day.

No one could accuse Mr. Dashwood's daughter now of being tame and spiritless; the very character

of her beauty had changed, and she had developed from a contemplative to a brilliant charmer with a single bound. What if her cheek were pale, were not her smiles all the sweeter? What if her wit were keen, did not the softness of her voice make amends? And what if she flirted a little—if a woman may be said to flirt, who merely unmasks the whole battery of her charms, and lets them play upon all alike without caring to watch the effect—was not every man there the happier for a look, a word, some slight favour bestowed with consummate grace? Already the women suspected her, but she had no idea of taking their lovers from them, she gave the greater part of her time to Mr. Velasquez, and all her thoughts to Jack. If this form of reprisal on her faithless knight were a cruel one to Mr. Velasquez, she did not care, and the fact that the two men were cousins increased her recklessness. She had been wounded through the softest, truest depths of her heart, poor, faithful, trusting Kitty! and she had openly been stabbed in her pride, and she could not sit down and bear her pain patiently, but she must thrust it away from her and revenge it, though it recoiled upon her with a deeper anguish than before.

And from a woman so proud, so pure, so cold as Kitty, a very little encouragement went a long way, and who can blame Velasquez if, long accustomed to be adored by women, he misread her, and thought that her school-girl fancy for Jack had paled in the dawn of a woman's passion for himself?

That night, when all the house was silent, he stood alone in his chamber, and with a sudden exultant movement of his arms upwards looked straight before

him as if he saw something for which he had struggled hopelessly, and at last won.

But it was not upon his restored birthright of honour, upon the removal of the stain from his father's name, that his thoughts rested; it was upon Katharine, radiant, lovely, unfaithful to another man so that she might be faithful to him—Katharine, the only woman on earth he had ever loved, and whom he had loved at first sight, and would love to the last breath of his body and soul.

He had been no better than a madman when, in the shock of discovering her girlish love for Jack, he had resolved to sacrifice himself for her, and use whatever power he might have over her father to secure her happiness with that young man. *To-night* the virile selfishness in him rose up, and flung all scruples, all self-renunciation by, and cried out that having won Kitty's love he would keep it, that having discovered his rights he would use them, and that even if she showed some faint relentings towards her former lover, he would crush them through her father, by the might of a certain scrap of paper that he held in his possession.

And did she not love him! Had she not during the past few days given him enough encouragement to satisfy a bolder man? Had she not at the "meet" that morning cut Jack Stormonth more than once as coldly, as deliberately, as if she had looked him straight in the eyes and turned away? Perhaps she had felt the difference between the love of a boy and the worship of a man, and she had yielded as swiftly to the charm as he had yielded to her And pray, since the world began, was there ever a lover who con-

sidered it unnatural that his passion should be reciprocated with the rapidity of lightning?

Poor Stormonth, poor fellow! And he had behaved like a boor, and like the beaten man that he knew himself that afternoon. Yet he had been honest in telling all he knew to his cousin's advantage, and honest too in giving his opinion to the reverse.

"To-morrow," said Mr. Velasquez as he sat down at the table upon which a lamp stood, "to-morrow shall decide it, and next day Mr. B. comes, and for the present I must leave her."

He took from his breast a pocket-book, out of which he drew some closely written sheets in the handwriting of his mother. He perused them carefully; they ran as follows:—

"When Mr. Fitzhugh asked me to marry him, I had for months been pursued by the attentions of his friend, Mallinger Dashwood. There was no comparison between the men, the one all generosity, fire, and honour, passionate to an extreme; the other cold, polished, fascinating, with an evil heart that sometimes looked out of his eyes, and appalled you. Perhaps he loved me—in a bad man's life there is usually one attachment that at its rise was pure, but there can be no purity in the love that persists in its suit when all hope of its honourable fulfilment is over, and when its declaration becomes a crime. I think that some men make love because they happen to be in the mood, and a woman is near; others take a violent fancy, and sicken of it as quickly; others, again, sit down deliberately to woo a woman, and the more they hate her that she will not yield, the more they love her,

"It was after my marriage that Mallinger Dashwood began his most determined siege, and I had to endure it silently, for I would not betray him to his friend—my husband. We were abroad for two years, and no matter where we went, he was there, but before we returned to England, I spoke to him.

"'Do not dare to cross the threshold of Queen Una's Palace when we go there,' I said, 'or I will tell my husband of every word and look you have given me.'

"He only smiled, and said, as he turned away, 'You will change,' but he never came to our house from that day to this, though his wife, God bless her! often did. I was very happy when we settled down in our new home, and my only cause of discontent was my husband's constant companionship with Mallinger Dashwood; but as I would not receive our neighbour, or even give my reasons for disliking him, Fitzhugh became silent on the subject, and set down my dislike of him to a young wife's usual distaste for the bachelor friends who take her husband away from her. And yet we met, more or less constantly, at other people's houses, and he never ceased, by some sign or look, to remind me that he loved me, and that he pitied me. I felt the lash of his pity—for I knew that, however dear I was to Fitzhugh, I was powerless to keep him at my side when Mallinger Dashwood beckoned, and for many lonely days and many lonely nights I had to thank the man whose supremacy of will and charm every one bowed to save myself.

"When I heard that he was about to marry, I rejoiced, for I thought, 'He is tired at last.' But

when he brought her home, and I met her abroad—a fair, fragile, loving creature who clung to his arm, and found her heaven in his eyes—I knew that he was unchanged, and that she would not change him. One day at some affair, he caught me alone, and asked if we might not be friends? I said, 'No!' and just after, his wife came in fainting, and I helped to recover her—after that we were friends. I never went to her house, but she often came to mine, and, though she loved me so much, she never had courage to ask me why I disliked her husband. I believe she thought I was jealous of his influence over Fitzhugh, and perhaps she shared in my feelings, since Dashwood in his turn was so constantly away from her, and she grudged every hour he passed out of her sight. I had one drop of sweet in my cup that even Mallinger Dashwood could not embitter—it was my little son. He was two and a half years old when Lady Alicia came to the Towers, and we would often play together with him, and months later she would say how she hoped her child would be a boy as Mallinger Dashwood wished. I thought then that his character might change when he had a child of his own, and that some day he and I might clasp hands as friends, but the day after his little daughter was born, I met him accidentally out walking, and he never behaved worse, or spoke worse than then. I could not go to poor Alicia, though I soon heard that she had been very ill, and it was because I was anxious to get news of her, that I did not try and hinder my husband from riding over to the Towers on the day when he met his death. I have thought since that my last words prepared the weapon that destroyed him, for I

said, 'I want some money so badly, Fitz; there are the servants and the household bills to pay. Have you anything coming in soon?'

"He kissed me and said, 'Don't worry, Tita, I am selling a bit of land to Dashwood, and no doubt he'll conclude the purchase this afternoon; it's only a hundred and fifty, but better than nothing.'

"I kissed him too before he rode away—O! how cold that kiss seemed to me afterwards, but I was angry with him that he could sell a rood of his ground, or take a shilling from Mallinger Dashwood. Poor though we might be, we were of the *haute noblesse* of the county, and the Dashwoods were mushrooms of less than a hundred years' growth, and in every game of chance, of skill, of strength, of love even, no Fitzhugh had ever been beaten by a Dashwood.

"Only a few hours had elapsed when a servant brought me a letter addressed in my husband's hand, and as I opened the envelope an enclosure fell out—it was a cheque. The mere touch of it seemed to burn me, I shook it from my knee, and read the letter. There were just a few loving lines to say he found Dashwood very lonely and that he was going to stay the afternoon, and dine with him, and added in a postscript that Lady Alicia was no worse; and just under this he had scratched, as if with another pen, 'I enclose a cheque—*get it cashed at once,*' and I thought it was just like him to send it me at once, not liking me to be worried about money a moment longer than he could help. But he did not know how I would rather have starved than see him sell his land to his friend, and when at lastI picked the cheque up, I would not even look at it, but thrust it into my

purse, and when my ponies came round, I drove into the town to the bank, and cashed it. I thought the man looked oddly at me when he asked how I would take the money, and I said mechanically, 'Notes and gold,' and when he said he would give me a hundred in gold, I stared at him, but he was counting them out and presently gave them to me in a bag, with fourteen bank notes, and asked me to look them over and see that they were right. I glanced at them, the top note was for a hundred, the second was for a hundred, so was the third—but I looked no farther, something chilled me to the very heart, and for the first time I felt the icy breath of dishonour. I gathered up the notes and gold and came away, but I do not know how I drove home. I remember nothing until I found myself sitting by a table upon which I had dashed all the money down, and sat staring at it—for my husband's honour was in its midst. He had no land to sell of the value of fifteen hundred pounds; with the exception of a few fields that he had inherited from his mother he had no power to sell a rood of the ground that he called his own. So Mallinger Dashwood must have lent nearly the whole of this money—and a Fitzhugh had stooped to accept it! Oh! my love, my dear, to think that I could have *hated* you then—and at that very moment you were lying dead, doomed to your death by the enemy who always called you his friend. I don't know how long it was before people came to me, and told me that he was dead, and how he died. I think that in my madness of shame for him I was glad at first when they told me; for I thought, 'He had some pride left, and so he died.' But all at once it came home to me

that he was *dead*—that I should never see my blue-eyed, bright-haired Alan again—and I broke away from them all, and I ran or stumbled every step of the way to Mallinger Towers with those behind who could not overtake me, and when I got to the house, I bade one of the servants take me to the fencing-room, and he stared, but guided me there . . . . and on the ground with a rapier through his heart, and his frozen blue eyes looking upwards, lay Alan, with a dark frown of horror, shame, and agony imprinted on his face. By his side stood Mallinger Dashwood, looking down on him, but as across that body our eyes met, I read triumph in his, and something devilish, mocking, triumphant—and I knew that in some hideous unknown way he had brought about my husband's death.

"Then I knelt down and put my arms round the poor clay, that lay slanting, with the bright steel of the rapier showing far behind his back, and I put my mouth to his, and I swore that I would bring his guilt home to the man whose will had guided the weapon, even if his hand had not driven it there. For I saw imprinted on my husband's face an expression of unutterable shame and horror, and mingling with it a grievous look, as if with his last breath he reproached some one who had betrayed him . . . . I have seen such a look before in a child's face when it is cruelly wronged, and yet cannot speak to defend itself . . . . and somehow I knew that he had died with his faith in me broken, and that the man he called his friend had broken it. You will say he was a coward to die so, but he was fiery and passionate, he could not live without honour, he could not live without me, and so —he died.

"God knows what words I said to Mallinger Dashwood then, but I remember how he looked, and how my curses beat against him, and recoiled as if from stone, and then an awful sense of his implacable power seized me, and I fell down with my arms round that poor murdered body, and so, locked together, we were carried away from the house. When I came to my senses I was still beside him, but they had washed and stretched my bonnie love, my bridegroom, only they could not smooth out the expression stamped on his face, or hide the rift that yawned in his side. Night and day I was with him, and sometimes fell into an exhausted sleep, with my head upon his breast; but whenever I was not thinking of the days that had gone by, I was struggling to find out some way by which I could discover the real truth as to how and why he died. A sufficient reason seemed to be found when my friends came to me, and told me that the signature to the cheque I had cashed by his desire was a forgery, and that he had forged it. They gave me all the details, and the servant's evidence. Do you think that for one moment I listened to or believed it? Did I not *know* that his dead hand was as clean as mine, and that in life it was incapable of such a deed? They did not understand my Alan—and I laughed at them, and they went away saying that I was mad, and how it was Mallinger Dashwood who had been wronged, not my husband. When they had all gone, I knelt down beside him, and twined his cold hand round my neck, and I whispered to him: 'Love, husband, can't you tell me, can't you give me a clue?' But I got no answer, only I thought that grievous look of betrayal grew fainter as I gazed

at him, and the fancy seized me that perhaps, in some other state of existence, he *knew*, and that when I went to him, he would come to meet me, knowing me for his true, his faithful Tita . . . . but though he could not speak, something seemed to pass from his dead heart to my living one as I pressed it against his breast, and as it took form and shape I thought I saw enacted before me the following scene :—

"Two men were fencing in a room lined with magnificent armour, fencing with fury, though the buttons on their foils showed that they had commenced to play for amusement only. They paused as a servant entered, and delivered to one of them a letter which he read with his back to his adversary, but when he turned, it was with a look of pointed significance, and an evil sneer curled his mouth as he thrust the letter into his breast, and took up his rapier to resume the game. I saw the second man stride forward, and with threatening gestures demand the letter. I saw the first hesitate, and fall back as if he simulated fear, but he offered no resistance when the other snatched from his breast the letter, and, rapier still in hand, read it. I saw a mortal change overspread his face, I saw a woman's writing, my own, on the page before him, then, without a word, without moving a step from where he stood, he ran the letter through his rapier, and the rapier through his heart —and died.

* * * * *

"I came out of my trance almost as cold and stiff as the dead in my arms, but with every detail of the scene stamped upon my brain, and by an effort of

will, I can at any moment recall it, like any other event that I have actually witnessed.

"Did any one hearken to me when I cried aloud for vengeance on that innocent blood? Was I reckoned anything but a madwoman when I accused Mallinger Dashwood of substituting another letter—a letter forged in my handwriting—for the one that had come from the bank, and that my husband never saw? No! I was only a degree less infamous than my husband, and in one respect more infamous still, since by my accusations I revealed the fact that Mallinger Dashwood had been my lover, both before and since my marriage. Not a woman in the county but believed I must have given him some encouragement for the guilty suit that I published, not a man but reckoned the name of Alan Fitzhugh a hopelessly stained one, and that for him it were better to be dead than living. I could make no fight against his enemy, I could only rail like a woman in the teeth of evidence that all others accepted, nor could even construe into guilt a letter that I received from him before I left Queen Una's Palace—a letter in which he asked me to be his wife. The poor Alicia was dead, leaving her little baby behind her, and I had wept for her the tears that I could not shed above my dead sweetheart. I tore the letter in two halves, and sent it back to him, I refused to look upon his face when he tried to force himself upon me, but I grew nervous at last, and resolved to go away, somewhere that he could not find me, or persecute me with his hateful love.

"My lawyer pitied me, while he despised my illusions, and privately he found a tenant for Queen Una's Palace, and a quiet home abroad for my boy

and me, to which we went in secret, under my mother's maiden name of Velasquez. Have I said but little of my boy, my Tito, his father's likeness in height and strength, in feature even, save that he had my dark colouring, and hair and eyes? It is not that I did not love him at that dreadful time, but that I loved his father more, and even now when I write of these things, my blood burns, my limbs tremble, I see once more the tragedy in the fencing-room, I am torn again by the fierce longing to clear my darling's name in the eyes of those who believed in his guilt, and to bring home his death to the man who caused it. If the letter is in existence, it would prove much, but to obtain possession of that letter is as unlikely as that Mallinger Dashwood still possesses it.

"Let me confess here that one mad, sinful way of arriving at the truth did, in the earlier days of my widowhood, suggest itself to me. I would accept his suit, simulate love for him, then, when he was weak as water in my hands, I would draw from him the whole story and betray him. But such desperate counsels soon left me, and in the training up of my young son, in watching over his childhood, his youth, and early manhood, much of the bitterness has been washed out of my heart, and my lips now would refuse to utter the curses that I once poured out upon the murderer of my husband."

* * * * *

The page ended there: on the other side were some lines in fresher ink, that had apparently been added recently:—

"My son has obtained the post of private secretary, or rather one of the secretaries, to Mr. B. The

great man brought his wife here to drink the waters, she took a fancy to Tito, and the thing was done. He has left me often before, so why do I trouble at his leaving me now? It is because he will probably meet Mallinger Dashwood in Mr. B.'s circle, may even go with Mr. B. to stay at the Towers, as I find the two men are on terms of intimacy; he may even stand in the room where his father died, and have at his very elbow the evidence that might clear that father, yet I expect nothing from his discoveries, but some harm done to his future when Mallinger Dashwood sees in him Alan Fitzhugh's son."

* * * * *

Here the entries ceased, but beneath the sheets was a letter, dated only the week previously.

"My son," it said, "you know the secret of the sliding panel in the fencing-room—I told you of it before you left me, as long ago your father told me—go there as soon as possible, and look inside the helms above the mantel-shelf. In a dream last night I saw Mallinger Dashwood stand before one of them, and draw from it a discoloured piece of paper that he read, and presently replaced. In my dream I saw the handwriting—*it was mine* in appearance, but it was a forgery.

"I cannot remain here in suspense, and to-morrow I set out for London, and will write you my address from there."

Here the letter ended abruptly, the characters of the writing had become shaky and confused. Mr Velasquez folded the sheets, and laid them down. Then he drew from his breast pocket a scrap of paper,

discoloured in its centre, but with certain characters on it easily legible. They ran as follows:—

"*I can endure this existence no longer. I am sick of keeping up in public the pretence of hating you, and some day I shall betray myself, and that poor hoodwinked fool of mine will kill us both—before we have been happy. You have often prayed me to go away with you—I will go. Meet me at the usual place at six o'clock to-morrow morning, and we will settle everything.—Your* TITA."

"And could my father," thought Velasquez, "a most true and honourable gentleman, believe that my mother wrote that infamous letter? Would not a moment's reflection have convinced him of such impossibility, had not Dashwood's face, with its devilish suggestions, its jeering triumph, seconded with hideous force the words that he saw traced by her hand? What wonder if, in that blinding moment of betrayal by wife and friend, his great heart broke, his wits left him, and, stunned, confused, with only one sense, and that of dishonour, he turned his weapon against his breast, escaping, by the only gate open to him, from his intolerable disgrace! And yet if he had kept his head, if he had gone straight to my mother with the letter in his hand, Dashwood must have been revealed, and his last desperate stake lost; but no doubt he had reckoned on the fiery temperament of the Fitzhughs, and possibly, when he saw my father dead at his feet, he anticipated but little difficulty in consoling a widow who would shrink from, and scorn the man who could commit a forgery, and take his own life when detected in the crime.

"It was an extraordinary piece of good fortune for Mr. Dashwood that his servant should bring the banker's letter to him so quickly after he had, by the handkerchief, aroused my father's suspicions, and it was so easy to change it for another that had long ago been prepared for such a chance as this—and so easy, when my father was dead, to lay the blame on the open letter found by his side."

Mr. Velasquez got up from his chair, and began to walk restlessly to and fro. "Poor mother!" he said at last, "the fiercest desire, the most coveted aim of your life, is granted, is achieved—and yet you will have no public triumph, no just revenge, and, instead of heaping retribution on your enemy, I shall ask you to take to your heart your enemy's daughter. It is possible that you will never know the truth, and yet—is there not something akin to dishonour in snatching love at the cost of a father's good name? No! for there is only one Katharine in the world, and she is worth more than ever was paid for a king's ransom."

CHAPTER XXI.

Love strikes one hour—LOVE.
Those never loved,
Who dream that they loved—ONCE.

Among the heap of letters by Mallinger Dashwood's plate at breakfast next morning was one addressed in the hand of Mr. Jack Stormonth, and he read this last, not without a curious glance first at his daughter. The letter ran :—

"Dear Mr. Dashwood,

"I am sorry that I cannot accept your invitation for dinner to-morrow night. But I shall be obliged if you will grant me a few minutes' private conversation (not with reference to Miss Dashwood) at your own time and place.

"Believe me,

"Your faithful servant,

"John Stormonth.

"Wednesday night."

As Mr. Dashwood replaced this letter in its envelope, he happened to catch Mr. Velasquez' eye, and he considered the young man attentively.

There was always an unusual, even original air about the private secretary that not even all the quietude of his perfect breeding could efface, but to-day there was a look of power, of supremacy about

him so that a close observer would have said, "that man has a scheme, probably a dangerous one, in his head—and he will win."

As the eyes of the two men met, one of those curious chills that old wives connect with the footstep gliding across a man's unmade grave, passed over Mr. Dashwood, and he knew that it was beyond John Stormonth's power to aid him now. Ay, but his daughter was potent yet, and the ghastly shadow that of late had scarcely left his elbow, stole back a little farther, as certain thoughts passed through his brain.

The great man was expected to return that afternoon for two days' stay only, then the party would break up, so far as those present were concerned, to be immediately followed by an entirely fresh one—with the exception of one of the guests now present at the table. But he had not yet been invited to remain, and Mr. B. would have to be consulted in the matter.

There was no "meet" that day. Some of the men went in for a little desultory shooting, others for a game at rackets; others again, fatigued by their exploits across country, danced attendance on the women, and held skeins of wool, or walked in the grounds—and wondered where was Kitty. Mr. Velasquez was visible enough, and Mallinger Dashwood had no fear of her unlawful proximity to Jack Stormonth, when he wrote a letter to that young gentleman, fixing an appointment with him for the following day: time, ten o'clock in the evening; place, the fencing-room. Then he sealed and despatched it, but would not go out, because he knew that Mrs.

Vivien was watching for him, and he could neither be brute enough to be rude to her, nor hypocrite enough to pretend to love her. There are times when a man passively submits to a woman's devotion, and experiences no discomfort from it; there are others when it becomes a perpetual blister, and he would eagerly exchange it for her hatred. Meanwhile, Katharine, with a heavy heart and angry brain, was hastening on foot to her friend Mary, having sent overnight by Mr. Velasquez the note that announced her coming. The way was rough, and somewhat long, but she hurried along it so fast that often she stumbled, and more than once she sobbed aloud, for there was no one by to hear her.

Poor Kitty, proud Kitty, *wretched* Kitty! had any one, she wondered, as heavy a heart as lay in her breast that day? But even at her journey's end she might not ease it, for Mary's kitchen was full of bustle and work that could not be put by for even the young lady, and there was an unwonted shadow on Mary's forehead, and a sharpened, anxious ring in her voice as she met Katharine with a curtsey, and a request that she would step into the parlour, where she would come to her as soon as possible. But Miss Dashwood refused to be thus stifled, and went to the dairy instead, where was coolness in plenty, and an innocent, sweet smell that refreshed her, and sped her memory back to the days—two years ago—when she had helped Jack to milk out of one of these very bowls. She took up a spoon idly, as if to skim one of those golden surfaces, and as she did so, the door opened behind her, and some one came softly in.

She thought it was Mary, and did not turn her head; but as she slipped the spoon beneath the cream, she said, "Your Mister Jack is a villain, Mary, and I—I *hate* him!"

Then she dropped the spoon, the better to cover her face with her hands, and she did not think it strange, or a liberty on Mary's part, when she felt a gentle pat on her shoulder, which, no doubt, was meant to convey comfort. But she shook it off nevertheless, and tried to catch her voice between her sobs, yet could not for half a minute; then she said:

"He has been flirting and carrying on—oh! ever since he was *born*—and I thought he loved me! And to think of how, for the last two years, I have never *looked* at a man—not that there were any to look at—only I never *thought* about them, because my eyes were so full of Jack! But he shall never know it—I will die before he shall know it, and I will marry Mr. Velasquez, or Mr. Somebody, just to see how he will look, and if he will be sorry . . . . he did not look sorry yesterday, only obstinate, and I dare say he had got a letter that morning from his Nina, hugged up in his breast pocket . . . . and he never *did* admire dark women till he forgot me!"

"I don't now," said Jack's own voice in her ear, and then Kitty's heart and sobs stopped together, but only for a few seconds, then she flashed round on him like a fury.

"How dare you?" she cried, and clenched her slender hand, then dropped it, and said haughtily:

"Is *eavesdropping* another of your accomplishments?"

"Yes, Miss Kitty, it is," said Jack, with spirit, "and you may thank your stars that I am able to hear as well as see, for if I had gone by my sight alone in the fencing-room the other night, I should never have taken the trouble to try and speak to you again."

"It is a trouble I could have dispensed with, sir," said Kitty, her head up, the tears on her cheeks conspicuously visible, "though it matters very little what you say, or what you think."

"I never think much about anything," said Jack, coolly, "I usually act. And I can assure you that it is by the merest accident I am at the farm this morning, and only through the officious zeal of our kind friend Mary that I find myself in your company at this moment."

"The last unfortunate accident, sir," said Kitty, with flashing eyes, "is easily mended——" and she moved to pass him, but he was too quick for her, and retreating to the door set his broad shoulders against it, then folded his arms, and looked at her.

She stood trembling with anger and outraged pride. Ah! where was his trusting, loving Kitty now? What looks were these darting from those eyes but a little while ago so full of love; what words were springing to the lips, that had clung to his but lately with such passionate abandonment of despair?

She put one slender hand upon her mouth, as if to force back the torrent that rose, then said in a low voice that trembled:

"I am fitly punished for having so far forgotten myself as to meet you in a clandestine manner—to come at your bidding not once, but twice—like any

housemaid, to whom her sweetheart has whistled. But, even if I had not found out what a—wretch—you are, I did not intend to meet you again, and I told my father so."

"And so I am a wretch," said Jack, looking at the young lady, habited in deep blue velvet and black fur from head to foot, with only the bloom and fairness of her face showing out delicately from that dark richness of colour.

"And if you had *not* got a lot of nonsense into your head, you still did not mean to meet me again?"

"That is so," said Kitty, coldly, "and now will you allow me to pass? My visit here this morning was to Mrs. Martin—not to Mr. John Stormonth."

"You shall pass, Miss Kitty," said Jack, doggedly, "when you have answered me one or two questions —and not before. Are you in love with Mr. Velasquez?"

No answer. Kitty had turned her back, and resumed the spoon that she had laid down a few minutes ago. Jack marched up to get a look at her face, but she turned it slowly away, and when he came round to the other side, she repeated the manœuvre, so that it was only by taking her two hands and turning her bodily, that at last he forced her to look at him.

"You are not blushing," he said, "so you don't love him—which makes your conduct all the more cold-blooded and disgraceful. What right have you to make him fall in love with you, and deceive him with your flirtatious ways, just because you are jealous of me?"

"Oh!" said Kitty, and gasped, "to think that

you should have become such a ruffian—and to think that I lo—oved you once!"

"Not half so much as you do now," said Jack, looking round, and spying behind him a wooden chair, upon which he sat down abruptly, and had snatched Kitty and got her firmly on his knee, before she could draw a breath.

"Oh! this is downright insult!" cried Kitty, struggling with all her might against the two strong arms that held her, and drawing her body back as far as possible from contact with him. "I'll tell—I'll tell my father when I get home!"

"Do," he said, "and Mr. Velasquez too, if you like. Now if I let go these pretty little fists"—he stooped and kissed them as they lay powerless in his grasp—"what will you do with them?"

"Beat you."

"Then I shall give you a kiss for every blow."

He released them as he spoke, but they lay very quiet in Katharine's lap, and a furtive smile was beginning to dimple round her lips as she met Jack's eyes.

"Kitty," he said gravely, "what has turned you into such an abominable flirt?"

This was too much. Kitty bounded on his knee, and once more tried to escape. But he held her fast, and repeated his question.

"How can you have the *audacity*," she said, after a deep-drawn sigh of amazement, "to talk of my flirting—you—the most disgraceful flirt in all your regiment——"

"That is another pair of shoes," said Jack, coolly, "but who told you that?"

"A lady; and I know all about your Nina—and you may marry her to-morrow if you please."

"Thank you. And who will you marry?"

Kitty did not condescend to reply.

"But you have not answered my question."

"About my being a flirt? I suppose I was born so. I had no idea I could do it till I tried! But no doubt, with practice, I shall become nearly as great a proficient as yourself."

"I'll soon make you forget all such tricks, Miss, when you marry me. But until then I will have you behave yourself, and remember that Jack Stormouth expects his sweetheart to behave as well as his wife."

The stone was quite rolled away from Kitty's heart by now. She could not hide the happiness that breathed through her hazel eyes, and the translucent tints of her skin; that played on the mouth, tender and fresh as a child's when the morning sun shines on it.

Yet her lover did not seek to touch those lovely lips, he even seemed to hold her a little farther away as he said, with eyes that she found stern:

"Could you not trust me, Kitty, or at any rate make sure that the gossip you had heard was *truth*, before you lowered yourself and me, by flirting with Mr. Velasquez?"

Kitty hung her head, and looked down at the flagged stones at their feet.

"It was not flirtation—exactly," she said, her penitent air but a thin cloak through which her happiness shone; "I liked him from the first—and I like him now."

"Perhaps you would prefer him to me, Miss," said Jack, giving her shoulder a little shake.

"He is better-looking that you are, I think," said Kitty, with a glance over Jack, meant to be judicial, "and then he is never rude—like you—and he doesn't flirt, so far as I *know*, with anybody but me!"

"Indeed," said Jack, with a ferocious sneer, "I'm much obliged to him for condescending to *flirt* with my property, but if I catch him at it after to-day, I'll break every bone in his skin."

"Perhaps Miss Nina has some kind friend who will perform the same office by you," said Kitty. "And pray, sir, don't you call it a very wrong, a very *wicked* thing to win a young woman's affections, when you are engaged to quite another person?"

"Not half so bad as for an engaged woman to flirt," said Jack, with decision; "and now listen to me, Kitty, and then put all that nonsense out of your head for ever. Nina and I are very good friends—but no more, and whoever has been making mischief about her is some tattling toad who likes Mr. Velasquez better than she likes me."

"Oh!" said Kitty, with a long, soft sigh, "and did you ever—ever kiss her?"

"No."

"And did she ever—kiss you?"

"Girls don't kiss men without encouragement, Kitty!"

"And did you never—encourage her?"

"Now, Kitty—you know my sex is so much more honourable in matters of that sort, than yours!"

She looked at him sideways, like a pretty inquisitive bird, but there was anxiety too in the glance, and he caught it.

"Kitty," he said, "if you ask me if I haven't

looked at girls, I have—but as to loving 'em, I always said '*there's my Kitty.*'"

"Oh!" cried Kitty, "you can speak of them in the plural!"

"And, I've kept you in my heart," went on Jack stolidly, "and kept *that* as clean as I could for your sake."

"Did either of them ever—ever sit on your knee?"

"Why?"

"Because I could never sit there again, you know, if she had!"

"Couldn't you?" said Jack, "but I'd make you. And pray, did Mr. Velasquez ever kiss you?"

"Oh, Jack!" she said, and shrank back with so hurt and shamed a face, that he implored her to forgive him, and by way of testing the purity of those lips seized them himself, and so with their arms round one another, they were for a brief space in heaven, and might have remained there some precious moments longer, had not the door opened, and showed Mr. Velasquez standing on the threshold.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Fight on, my men," Sir Andrew says,
"A little I'm hurt, but not yet slain;
I'll lie but down and bleed awhile,
And then I'll rise and fight again."

If the outside of a dairy-door could speak, and chronicle its impressions of a human face, it would have said that no such happy, brilliant, *successful* an one had approached it these twenty years than that of Mr. Velasquez. Mary Martin herself had guided him part of the way to her young lady, and with bitter satisfaction—left him. But I think no young man of three-and-twenty, however old for his years, can behold unmoved the spectacle of his beloved, safe and happy in another man's arms, especially when he was on the point of securing her in his own. So Mr. Velasquez stood there, looking, with all the colour and life dying out of his face, and Katharine, after one brief glance at him, hid her face in Jack's shoulder.

"Good morning," said Jack, drily, "I can't get up to shake hands, but you understand that I bear you no malice."

Mr. Velasquez had advanced a step or two, the door was closed behind him. In the cold morning light his dark face showed the hue of ashes, above which his eyes blazed like coals a-fire. He was not looking at Jack, but at the back of a hazel-coloured head, and his glance too included the sweep of two

arms that enclosed, without throttling, a beloved neck.

"Katharine Dashwood," he said, and at this familiar unusual address, the girl started, and half showed a lovely profile, "if you loved this man, why did you pretend to love me?"

Then Kitty would have arisen in her wrath, and without the ghost of a blush about her, had not Jack held her as in a vice, but she found voice to say:

"I never pretended—you know that I never loved anybody but—Mr Stormonth."

If the situation were ridiculous, I don't think either of the three persons concerned in it felt themselves so, and while Kitty (like any other shamefaced woman who knows herself in the wrong) clung to Jack as her natural refuge, Mr. Velasquez seemed oblivious of pots and pans as he looked at his rival.

"I think, sir," said Jack, politely, "that you have —*stolen*, about as much as you have a right to expect. No doubt you will retain the document—but your dishonest intentions on the lady are baulked." But Kitty's sense of justice was stabbed by this, and she got free of Jack suddenly, and turned with flaming face to Mr. Velasquez, then bowed her head as one ashamed.

"It is all my fault," she said, "I liked you—always —from the very first—and when I—I got jealous, ... I, I thought I liked you better!"

Mr. Velasquez laughed, and his laugh was not pleasant to the ear. All the bitterness of his overshadowed youth, all the silent suffering of an inherited disgrace, stirred in him now, and turned his nature to gall, as he looked in Kitty's eyes and knew himself betrayed.

Perhaps he was not in his right mind then, or a devil entered into it, and swayed him, for when he turned away from her, and went out, he had made his resolve.

It was a very pale face that Kitty turned on her lover as the door closed.

"What is he going to do?" she said in a whisper.

Jack looked grave, and evidently other things beside courtship were in his mind.

"Kitty," he said, standing up, "do you know that I have refused an invitation to dine with you to-morrow evening?"

Kitty opened her lips, but astonishment, and some remaining fright, kept her dumb.

"But I shall be in the fencing-room at rather a late hour."

"And I cannot meet you there, Jack," she said, sadly.

"I don't expect you," he said, "I go there to meet your father."

Kitty drew a quick breath, and Jack's arm went round her in case of her needing support.

"Jack," she whispered, "what does he want with you? Don't trust yourself with him—and if you *must* be there, why I will be there too!"

"You can't, Kitty," he said, and a dark shadow fell on his usually bright face, "there is *men's* work to be done between him and me to-night."

Kitty's pliant body seemed to stiffen and grow cold as she drew herself away from Jack. "Won't you tell me, dear?" she said.

"No," he said, "when we are married, perhaps—but not now. He has been very cruel to us, Kitty,

and only because my mother was a Fitzhugh—though I think he would give you to Mr. Velasquez if he asked for you to-night."

"He might *give* me," cried Kitty, with eyes that lightened only to be drowned in tears, "but I would defy Mr. Velasquez to *take* me."

"He sha'n't," said Jack, forgetting everything as he looked at her, but that here was a princess whom true love had turned into a timid loving child.

"You might tell me," she said, but offered him no bribe, though that mattered little, as he was one of that bold order of lovers who know how to seize, better than to sue.

"Miss Katharine!" said a sharp voice from the door, and Mary Martin came slowly in.

Her usually fresh face was pale, her eyes told of a sleepless night, and there was a nervous tremor in the usually firm hands as she approached the young pair.

"Master Jack," she said, "I've not told my man yet—and I mislike the thought of turning out of the farm where I've lived over seventeen year—and you can stop Mr. Velasquez if you please, though there was murder in his face when he went out. It can't do *him* any good, nor you and Miss Kitty, to rake up bygones, and I wish my tongue had been struck dumb in my head before I spoke to things that I knew."

"Did you have any talk with him this morning?" said Jack, looking at her keenly.

"Not I, sir; when he said he wanted some private words with me, I just brought him straight to the dairy, and said I'd join him—and to guess by his face, you gave him words enough, for all the short time he was here."

"Mary," said Kitty, and put her arm round the comely shoulders, and kissed the anxious face, "I don't know what secrets you and Master Jack have got, but don't you fret—we'll take care of you."

"Of course," said Jack, heartily, and kissed Mary too, yet she was only half comforted when Kitty thought of the time, and all unwillingly, but in a fever to go.

"What is the hour to-night, Jack?" she said; but Jack would not tell her. And so, by perpetually prolonged farewells they parted, and she went, light as a feather, along the way that she had traversed so painfully a few days before.

Who would seek to weed out Hope from a human heart? But if you eradicated it thoroughly, you would leave no heart behind.

CHAPTER XXIII.

We couldna gie Sir James's purse,
We couldna gie his brechan,
But ye sall hae his bleeding heart,
But and his bleeding tartan.

THE great man arrived in time for dinner that night, and while revolving his campaign among adjacent dairymaids for the morrow, consoled himself with the company of half-dressed aristocrats for the present. He found time for a few instructions to Mr. Velasquez, then dropped his intellect, and skipped about like any Jack o' Lanthorn among the Merry Wives of Windsor. But, late as Mr. Velasquez's duties as secretary kept him, he had done some other correspondence more weighty to himself previously, and he had ridden far to register it. Mary Martin's confession, written from memory, and the letter forged in his mother's name, had swelled the bulk of his packet, and now he left things to chance, and at dinner was nearly as bright and brilliant as Katharine herself. If they were placed far apart, no one remarked the accident save Mrs. Vivien, who had heightened her bloom by rouge, and her eyes by belladonna, yet had no charm to summon up a smile to the lips that were usually so triumphantly fresh.

"Where have you been all the morning?" she said, addressing Mr. Velasquez, adding, with a glance at Katharine, "I mean where have you *both* been?"

"In each other's company for about sixty seconds," replied Mr. Velasquez.

The woman turned, and looked at the man, but for once her sex was beaten, and only an impenetrable obstinacy met her gaze.

"How like you are to your cousin!" she said, and then his features seemed to break up, like the facets on a diamond stone.

"How *much* you know," he said, and for a moment he seemed to feel two fair, helpless-looking hands at his breast pocket—hands that his manhood forbode him to bruise, but he knew that there was nothing left to steal now.

"About everything," she said, "except your relations with Mr. Jack Stormonth."

Mr. Velasquez glanced across at Katharine. She was looking at him with that pleading sad look which a woman will sometimes address to an outraged lover who has possessed her mind but not her heart, and whom she has unconsciously betrayed.

"What are you going to do?" said Mrs. Vivien, and he felt as if a snake had reared itself at his elbow, and poisoned his thoughts.

"I am going to mind my own business," he said, in so pleasant a voice that it made no discordant echo on the hum of talk that went on around.

"And will your business be that of Katharine Dashwood?" said Mrs. Vivien in the same key.

"That is between ourselves," he replied.

"And Jack Stormonth stands midway in the path," said Mrs Vivien.

"And can be removed," said Mr. Velasquez, his glance travelling along the pure white of the table,

until it reached his host. Perhaps his eyes expressed what his tongue had refused to utter, but there was a look of menace, of power, in them that startled Mrs. Vivien, and set her heart throbbing with anxiety for Dashwood.

What could she do for him? By a fatal accident her trump card had been snatched from her, and she suspected that it was now in the hands of Mr. Velasquez. Were not the two men cousins, and if Jack were so sure of his Kitty, might he not, in mere justice, clear dishonour from the name—his own mother's name—of Fitzhugh?

Yet, if Nemesis were sitting at Mallinger Dashwood's board, the latter showed no sign of recognizing that gruesome face, and never had his table shone more brightly with wit and beauty, never had he appreciated more fully his power in being able to beckon to him such guests, as perhaps he had never excelled himself more brilliantly as host.

Katharine thought his glance at her kinder than usual, but was racked with doubts as to his business on the morrow with Jack, and tormented by fear of danger to that young man from Mr. Velasquez. She got no word with the latter that evening until the party broke up, when she wished him good-night; he replied, they touched hands, and parted. She knew then that her sin towards him was unforgiveable, that whatever he had set his hand to do, he would do it, and that her influence over him now was in the proportion to thistledown pressing against iron.

When the last guest had left the drawing-room, Katharine approached her father, and said:

"I met Mr. Stormonth by accident at Mary Martin's this morning, and he told me that he had an appointment with you in this house to-morrow night."

She was looking at her father, and she saw how every vestige of colour left his face, though the expression of it did not change in the least, and his voice was as usual when he said:

"Did he tell upon what business?"

"No. But you mean him no harm, father?" said the girl, wistfully.

"Perhaps he means more to me," said Mr. Dashwood, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, perfectly master of himself, but with an *odd* look that in some vague way presaged disaster.

"Father," she said, "he is my friend, and so he must be yours, and I know he never meant you any harm—nor ever will."

"We shall see," said Mr. Dashwood, and dismissed the subject and his daughter at the same moment. Left alone, he glanced cynically round the beautiful room, then said aloud:

"And to-morrow—to-morrow?"

He did not answer his own question, but then he had not answered his daughter's. Perhaps both would have answered themselves by that hour of the clock next day.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Nay, then," said the Lord Percy,
"I told it thee beforne,
That I would never yielded be
To no man of a woman born."

It being the last day of their visit to Mr. Dashwood, some of the guests affected a little sadness at breakfast, which was a quiet one, though brightened by the men's scarlet, for everybody meant to hunt.

"There's a dreadful monotony about the country," whispered Lord Noll to Mrs. Vivien, "town will be heaven after this."

"Speak for yourself," she said sharply, and exchanged a look with Mr. Dashwood that poor Noll intercepted, and in one smart scourging stroke got his lesson, and accepted it. If a remorseful thought crossed her mind of how she was throwing away the substance for the shadow, she did not show it, she had no eyes now for any man save the one whom she had every reason to despise and hate, but whom she—loved.

How swiftly passed that day, but with how little incident to mark it out as anything uncommon to those for whom the drama would close that night! There was nothing odd in Mr. Velasquez coming back early, and finding a telegram on his dressing-table, and nothing odd too in his changing his clothes, and going out again, returning just in time for dinner.

To Katharine his appearance in the drawing-room was an intense relief, as she was nearly certain that from a distance in the hunting-field she had seen him in conversation with Jack Stormouth, and she dreaded some quarrel and subsequent encounter between the two men.

But, though she watched him covertly throughout dinner, she could gather nothing from his expression, and to an outside observer, even to the servants (our keenest detectives) nothing appeared to ruffle the ordinary, sparkling surface of the evening, nor did any one present find it extraordinary that at dessert Mallinger Dashwood should rise, saying that he had an appointment which would only detain him a very short time, so that he would return almost immediately.

If Katharine turned paler than she had been all day, no one heeded it, not even Mr. Velasquez, whose eyes went to the clock, where the hands pointed exactly to the hour fixed for Jack Stormonth's interview with the master of the house.

Some of the ladies wondered why Katharine lingered so long over her fruit, yet conversed so little with Mr. B.; perhaps one or two smiled when on Mr. Velasquez rising, she rose also, and hurrying after, was yet not able to overtake him.

In the great hall she turned, as he was turning, not towards the drawing-room, but towards the billiard-room, and entrance to the house, and followed him.

Mrs. Vivien, who happened to be nearest to her, followed also, and this bold example of curiosity being set, all the other ladies followed in their turn, so that it was a long and brilliant *queue* that spread out behind the

handsome young man who strode on till he had reached the great door, which with masterful hand he unfastened, and set it wide.

There entered immediately a woman, to be recognized instantly as Mr. Velasquez' mother. I don't know if she were so very beautiful, but she had that quality of distinction which makes a glance from one woman's eyes an honour; while the ogle of another is not worth returning.

"Come, mother," said the young man, and took her hand and led her past Katharine and the women, who were beginning to shiver as the cold air rushed through the open door, and to wonder why this untimely visitor ignored the mistress of the house, and why Mr. Velasquez did not introduce her?

For a moment or two the girl stood looking after the two retreating figures, then, like an automaton, she moved after them, and gliding up the staircase was lost to sight. Mrs. Vivien vanished in her wake, and Lady Becky, who had a keen sense of the ridiculous, burst out laughing, and suggested that, as all the rest seemed to be playing the game of "follow my neighbour," they had better do the same. And she suited the word to the deed. No servants had appeared upon the scene; the voices of the men came faintly from the dining-room, as not expecting much fun, but moved by that spirit of curiosity which would draw a female barefoot over red-hot coals if anything she wanted to see were beyond, the women caught up their trains, and fled after Lady Becky as fast as their legs would carry them.

Mrs. Vivien had been quick, but not quick enough; the last fold of her dress whisking round a corner

betrayed her; but Lady Becky, and some of those behind, felt a little dismay on perceiving the direction she had taken, and half inclined to turn back from those dark corridors in one of which the fencing-room was situated.

But somehow they felt that something uncanny was abroad that night, that strange events were about to occur, so they took boldly the plunge into darkness close upon the cheerful click of Lady Becky's heels, and were rewarded by seeing a gleam of light in the distance—a gleam that came from the open space where a panel had been but a few moments ago.

It was only when they had scampered to, and reached it, that a momentary doubt crossed their leader's mind as to the good taste of her curiosity; but it was too late now to retreat, for those crowding behind pushed her over the threshold, pushed her past the two women who had first arrived, and who feared to advance, so that, like a flock of gaily plumaged birds, they fluttered into the room, and into the presence of a scene quiet indeed throughout, but terrible to look upon, and remember, to each one's dying day.

Mallinger Dashwood was standing by the mantelpiece, the strong light of a lamp turned on his face, and on that of the woman who stood at a little distance, and who was speaking to him.

A little behind her stood Mr. Velasquez, and farther away, on the opposite side of the room, Jack Stormonth, who stepped forward with a gesture of anger as the bare-necked, jewel-decked intruders swept in, but when he moved as if to expel them, Dashwood with a gesture of the hand checked him.

"Let them stay," he said, but he did not even

glance in their direction, nor did Tita, as with cloak slipped to her feet, and veil thrown back, she stood drawn up to her fullest height, ay, almost to the height of him.

"And now it is brought home to you," she said; "the truth has come to light at last; the long-buried crime that you hid beneath your cloak of honour, the crime you believed it beyond human power to prove, has risen up against you, *and is proven.* In my hand I hold the letter, forged by you in my handwriting, which compelled Allan Fitzhugh to his death, the letter in which I implied a guilty intimacy with you, in which I asked you to elope with me, and which drove him mad. That forged letter you gave to him in this room—and he ran it through his heart and died. You tore it from the rapier—see, the tear is here, and the stain too, and you foully lied when you swore that you had given him the banker's letter containing the forged cheque—he never beheld it, and you knew that your signature to it had been forged by the innocent hand of your wife."

Mallinger Dashwood started slightly; it was the first sign of emotion he had shown since Tita entered.

"There is a woman living who will come forward as witness, to swear that she saw some of the cheques that your wife, proud of being able so exactly to imitate your handwriting, signed in your presence; one of those cheques you kept, perhaps with no intention of putting it to such deadly use as you subsequently did, but when the opportunity came, you used it.

"My husband came here one day and sold you a piece of land. You paid him for it with a cheque for

£150; he enclosed it in a letter to me, and having left it in the library, to be despatched, he went into the adjoining room and sat down with his back to the library, and probably read, or possibly he fell asleep. Your wife's maid, going in search of you shortly afterwards, saw you (herself unperceived) carefully unfasten my husband's letter, saw you take out the cheque, and substitute for it another. That other was the cheque for £1,500, that I cashed a little later, and about which the banker wrote to you, as he had subsequent doubts of the genuineness of the signature. And you swore that you taxed Alan Fitzhugh with the forgery, that he admitted it, and that, when he implored your mercy (good God! mercy from a Dashwood to a Fitzhugh!), and for a moment you hesitated, in a fit of despair he seized his rapier, and, unable to support his dishonour, slew himself.

"So much you swore at the inquiry held on his death, and you swore that the signature was not yours —you were too proud a gentleman to lie on that point, but not too proud to forge his endorsement on the back of the cheque, and to fill in the dates and the amount in as different a hand as possible to your usual one—you were not too proud to let the innocent hand of your wife brand a man with a lifelong dishonour, even if he had elected to survive that dishonour. Perhaps you did not mean him to kill himself, you intended only to disgrace him in the eyes of the world, and in my eyes, that I should turn from him in loathing, and that then I should turn to you."

"I did intend it," said Mallinger Dashwood, deliberately.

"*You!*" Hitherto Tita's voice had been clear and even, but now it swelled out with all the pent-up scorn and hatred of over twenty years. "*You!* I would rather have become wife to the meanest groom in my stables than to have endured the touch of your hand upon mine! to have been forced to breathe the air of heaven by your side! No one will ever love you as women loved Alan Fitzhugh, for your heart is black to the core, and his was white as snow."

"There is one," cried a voice; and from out that crowd by the door there stepped a woman, who crossed the floor with hasty step, and, sinking down on her knees by Dashwood's side, seized his hand and buried her face in it.

For a moment Tita looked down at the abased figure, at the glorious hair, at the white shoulder that gleamed out of the heavy folds of satin that swept the floor; then she said, "So there is left to you, all dishonoured as you are, and no longer secretly, but as you shall be in the full blaze of the world—there is left to you this consolation—that, murderer, forger, liar that you are, one poor woman can find it in her heart to—love you!"

Dashwood had not stirred beneath that clasp on his hand, but now he shook it off, made a stride forward, snatched Tita in his arms, and kissed her on the mouth with all the baulked passion, the longing of half a lifetime, strangling by mere force the shriek that rose to her lips. Then he let her go, and stepping back swift as light, took from the wall a rapier stained with rust and blood, and, before any could move or hinder him, he had turned the point to his breast, and driven it home with unerring skill, saying

as he did so, "I have kissed you, Tita," and, with his eyes upon hers fell dead at her feet.

* * * * *

They say that, on a certain night of the year, those who have courage to hide in the great fireplace of the fencing-room will see a strange sight. The moonlight, glinting here and there on the walls of armour, will glint also on two men engaged in rapier-play, that waxes fiercer and fiercer till seemingly they are interrupted from without, when the light fades, and when next the two men are seen face to face, one of them holds in his hand a letter. By gesture the other demands it, is refused, but snatches and reads it . . . . then all grows dim, but when again the moonbeams play upon the spot, they show a dead man with a letter pinned by a rapier to his breast. Anon the room is empty, but there is a broad stain upon the floor, and it is brown with age, and now the walls are dim with dust. But see, whose is that shape yonder that moves forward, a woman clinging to his hand? He shakes her from him, and snatching a rusty rapier from the wall thrusts it through his heart, and falls!

And now all is dark again, save that the light falls upon the spot where the fresh blood has washed out the stain of the old.

THE END.

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